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White Rose of Weary Leaf

By

Violet Hunt

Author of "Sooner or Later," etc.

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PART 1

PART I

White rose in red rose garden
Is not so white.
Snowdrops that plead for pardon
And pine for fright.
Because the hard east blows
Over their maiden rows
Grow not as this face grows, from pale to bright.

Behind the veil, forbidden
Shut up from sight,
Love, is there sorrow hidden,
Is there delight?
Is joy thy dower or grief,
White rose of weary leaf,
Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light?

—A. C. Swinburne.

White Rose of Weary Leaf

CHAPTER I

THREE or four early impressions, the fewer the more indelible, some things seen and chance words heard, influence character to a degree out of all proportion to their importance. Picturesque, trivial, grotesque or poignant, as they may be, they are imprinted on a fresh white unscored surface, and some of the twists and deviations of the line that stands for character are determined.

Amy Steevens was a common person's child—a unit of no particular ethical value; and she lived with her humble parents in a mouse-ridden villa in a country town. Next to her own people, the mice were the most important things in the house. She dared not object to these familiar fauna, for her busy mother would have laughed at her. So she fell in with the circumstances of her environment and took an intelligent interest in the colours of the mice that early in the summer mornings ran in a procession across the flap of the sheet in front of her chin. She saw them large as race-horses, dun and ginger-coloured, cheerful beasts, who coursed freely past, taking no notice of the goggle eyes of Amy, fixed on them, as she lay in bed, afraid to be afraid.

An only child, she was of necessity unattended, and was often sent out to play in the field behind the house by herself.

When Amy was about five years old she saw a plainly dressed woman standing stock still with her hand on

the gate that she herself must pass through to get home. As she approached, the woman said, politely:

'Little girl, will you kindly take my arm off the gate for me?'

The poor creature was paralysed!

The most appalling ghost story that ever was told, could never equal, for Amy, the horror of that incident, which nobody ever explained to her. The bland white face, the inert arm, the woman who was used to being partly dead—she never knew what it all meant till the surgeon at the Kimberley field Hospital informed her.

Her home was next door to a prison, and sometimes the little Amy could get no sleep for the dreadful noise of hammering within those walls. The cause of the noise was explained to the child, there was no notion of sparing Amy's nerves, 'she hadn't got any business to have any.' Every question duly met with an explanation when her elders knew one and had time to offer it. There was a figure nailed to a cross hanging on the wall in her aunt's room;

'Who is that poor man?' asked Amy.

'The Saviour,' her aunt replied, and Amy accepted that title for the interesting piece of sculpture and example of man's cruelty to man.

Amy's father was an engineer, a little wiry active fellow who was never at home. He wore himself out and died young. But her mother lived to be old and a charge on Amy.

'Still, she had been a fairly decent mother to me,' Amy always said, in the days before she learned to speak good English, which she picked up as she picked up most other things.

'I don't pretend to be a lady,' she would say, 'but I have been with people, don't you know?'

Amy had been, not to school, but in a school—a different thing. She had assisted in a dressmaker's shop, and in a typewriting establishment. She had been secretary to an author, and companion to an idle lady abroad. She had been on the stage. She had been to Russia with the famous Dr. M—— as his amanuensis, and been sent home in a British steamer when trouble arose. She has seen a battlefield in South Africa, and the results of it in hospital afterwards. She was a constitutionally rolling stone.

She had a good figure, and a bad complexion. She was pale, and sometimes yellow. That was because she had roughed it too much; for in some of her more easy situations Amy flowered, and bloomed, like a little swart out-of-doors London shrub, suddenly transported into the amenities of a greenhouse. A season of comparative indigence and the obligation of looking after herself would thrust her back into comparative plainness. But her figure, of which she was reasonably vain, she meant never to neglect or 'let go.' She did not do it on purpose, but her clothes generally clung to her in the Greek fashion, and she was fond of carrying her purse round her neck slung on a heavy gold chain, so that it traced clearly the groove of the breast. It was as if Artemis, strong in her austerity, should care to define the figure. She wore cheap shoes, with high heels, which she managed admirably. Her sweet, pert, pathetic mouth suggested alternately frankness and reserve, accordingly as she chose to pinch and prim it, or wear it ingenuously open, snatching the full effect of short upper lip. Her mouth was her best feature, it spoke of race, though where did Amy get race? Her prevailing expression was one of quiet expectancy, that of the thoroughly skilled workman who knows that, armed with the power of his hand and eye, he

will not be permitted to go to the wall. Amy knew she was efficient.

On her way back from Russia she had accidentally stumbled into an excellent berth. She did not expect to keep it, in view of her tendency to rove, but then she counted on getting something else as good. She was always careful not to attach herself, and thus avoided a considerable amount of heart-break. An English gentleman of good family, Mr. Jeremy Merion Dand, of Swarland, travelling with his wife and daughter, had come across her in an hotel on the Riviera. She had been staying there for three months with an old lady as her companion, an old lady who could neither give nor refuse her a character, for she had died quite suddenly in the hotel at Costebelle. She appeared to have no relations, so it fell to Amy to bury her in the English cemetery, after a short but tough wrestle with local authority and red tape.

Mrs. Dand heard the story, circulated, as it was, all over the big hotel. She was a sentimentalist and she found Amy most quaint. Dulce, her twelve-year-old daughter, found Amy great fun. Mr. Dand, the father, found her quite uninteresting, but engaged her, to please his womankind. He was a large lazy man, supposed to be clever, known to be cool, savage and cross-grained. Amy was to go back with these people and be companion to Dulce in their English home, Swarland Hall, situated in one of the loveliest tracts of country in the north of England.

They all returned via Paris, and stopped a couple of nights at the Hotel Rex. The day before that fixed for their crossing to England, Amy took her charge for a walk in the Tuileries Gardens. Dulce, a sophisticated girl of twelve, did not in the least care for the bird-fancier, and his waiting meinie of sparrows, or to go

into the Louvre for a last look at the Victory. Neither did Amy. Art was nothing to her. She saw more beauty in a new blouse—which she pronounced blowze—or a smart pair of shoes, than in all the loosely draped Victories in the world. The two sat down on a bench in the sun next to a young student with a flowing tie, and he turned round and recognized Dulce's new governess.

'Why, Amy!' he exclaimed, with a foreign accent.

'Why, Mark!' she replied, holding out her hand cordially. 'Here we are again. You look splendid. What are you doing with yourself just now?'

'Shall I use the words of Mazzini? *Je conspire toujours.*'

'Oh, Mark, you silly!' exclaimed Amy. 'What on earth do you get by it? Do be more businesslike. And are you in funds? Because I am.'

'*Ma chère,* do you think I would borrow of a woman, although I *am* a Pole?' He referred to some private joke of their own, for Amy laughed. 'You are too generous, Amy, but be at ease, I am all right for the present. Can you come and dine with me to-morrow, Place Blanche?'

'Sorry, Mark, can't!' answered the girl. 'I am in a situation and what's more, I am off to England to-morrow.'

'She is looking after me!' volunteered the child.

'Yes, that's so,' answered Amy, serenely. 'Miss Dulce Dand, her mother's a famous novelist—sells eight thousand copies. She's been translated into Russian, I believe. I'm her maid more or less, and Dulce here's companion. I am to get forty pounds a year, and my washing. That is why I can lend you some, if you like?'

'Save it!' said the student.

'Me! Never! If you won't have it, I shall put it on my back.'

'We shall see that Amy wants for nothing till she dies,' said the child sententiously. 'I am simply devoted to her. She has vowed never to leave me. I shan't ever marry, I am going to be ugly, Mum says, and I need never think of men, for they'll never think of me!'

'All the same, she never thinks of anything else but love and marriage,' said Amy with a shrug. 'It isn't healthy, at her age!'

'Don't you love the trees, the flowers, the blue skies overhead, Mademoiselle?' asked the student, bending towards the dark-skinned, strong-featured schoolgirl. 'Don't you ever run and play, and rejoice in your youth and your liberty?'

'No,' said the child, looking sly, 'I can't say I care for flowers or trees and things, but I don't mind what they call "running away" and leaving Amy and you alone together a bit, if you like.'

'You needn't do anything of the kind,' said Amy, 'I have nothing to say to my friend Mark that a child might not hear, and you are a terribly advanced child, and far more likely to corrupt me than I you. And besides, we must go home.'

'Make an appointment with him, then,' pleaded Dulce.

'Yes, we will—to meet—next time I am thrown on the world again, which won't be long, in spite of what the child says, Mark. That was how we met before, without a *sou*, either of us. Waifs! Strays! Ne'er-do-weels! Odd-come-shorts!'

'I believe, Amy, that you enjoy it,' the pale student said. 'You are like me, homeless, unattached, uncounted, ah!—is there one soul in this great city, nay in any city, to whom our death would import? Picture it! . . . Sometimes, Amy, I feel so light, so useless, so little anchored to this round ball called the world that we

squeeze and fight on, that I wonder I don't float up—up—off it—and away! But where to? My God? Amy, do you never——?'

'I always remind myself that there's such a thing as a force of gravity,' said Amy. 'Come, Dulce. Write to me, dear Mark: Swarland Hall, near Oldfort, Yorkshire. Prosper—and don't be throwing more bombs than you can help! Adieu.'

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Jeremy Dand was sitting with her husband on the steps of the hotel when Amy and Dulce came up, with her lap full of newspapers. Mr. Dand rose and walked away as they approached and Mrs. Dand greeted her progeny with the lazy 'Well!' of usage, and Dulce exclaimed: 'Oh, you've got the London papers! Hooray!'

She was at once absorbed in the latest *cause célèbre* and her mother, turning to Amy, said languidly:

'Jeremy saw you in the gardens, Amy, sitting gossiping with a man on a bench. He didn't quite approve of it.'

'He was an old friend,' answered Amy, politely, 'my fellow secretary out in Russia. He won't come bothering much—he is too busy making bombs!'

'My dear child, what funny people you do know!'

As Amy had expected, the suggestion of Nihilism effectively removed the aroma of nursery-maid flirtation from her interview with Mark Pogogeff, and added a flavour of grim romance which was not lost on the lady novelist. 'I'll tell Jeremy it was an anarchist,' Mrs. Dand murmured, as they went in to *déjeuner*. Mr. Dand never took *déjeuner*. He breakfasted solidly, English fashion, and ate no more till dinner.

After the repast, the lazy and replete bestowed themselves on divans in the lounge, shielded from the draughts of the open doors by divers flowering shrubs and sharp-edged palms. Dulce, with a sheaf of papers under her arm, flung herself upon Amy, who protested:

'Don't "drag" me, Dulce, there is nothing more tiring. What is it?'

'It's the Meadrow divorce case! So fearfully exciting! And Amy, there are four co-respondents, and Sir Mervyn Dymond, who is staying at this very hotel, is one of them. Fancy!'

'I can't fancy. I won't. How do you know that he is staying here?'

'Looked in the hotel book. His name is there all right. He is from Brindisi, I looked at his luggage. He only arrived last night. I made that out, too.'

'Is he alone?'

'Yes, quite. Perhaps he has been sent for?'

'Well, it is no earthly business of ours.'

'Oh, Amy, aren't you really one little bit interested?'

'I am, rather,' admitted Amy candidly. 'Give us a paper—the one you have got in your hand.'

'Fuller details here!' said a voice from behind the largest palm and a London evening paper of the day before was launched at them and fluttered down on the bamboo table in front of the guilty pair.

'Oh, papa!' exclaimed Dulce. 'You were there all the time, listening to what we were saying—playing a trick on us!'

Mr. Dand rose.

'No trick!' he said, 'you ignored me, so I let you run on. Go to your mother, Dulce, and see if you can help her with her packing.'

'It's all done. Amy did it.'

'Do as I tell you.'

The child departed, downcast. Amy's employer came and stood quite close up to her, towering over her aggressively. He was an ugly-handsome man, of heavy build, with dull, deep-set eyes, and an obstinate chin and

mouth. The mouth was beautifully formed, but Amy, with her conventional canons of taste, thought him ugly and heavy, and not careful enough about his clothes.

'Amy, do you think you ought to allow the child to talk to you like that?'

'How can I prevent her?'

'You should not encourage her.'

'I don't think I do encourage her,' replied Amy slowly, as if she were thinking it over. 'But I should say it was very unwise to make a fuss. It would only strengthen the habit if I were to make too much of it. She doesn't know the meaning of half the words she uses. Did you notice how she pronounced the word co-respondent—all in one?'

'I will ask you to be more careful in future,' Mr. Dand continued, coldly. 'And another thing, I would rather you arranged not to meet your friends in the public gardens, if you can help it. You will tell me you can't avoid it, I suppose?'

'Well,' said Amy, 'one can't help having friends, at least anyone who has been about as much as I have——'

'True!' said Mr. Dand, turning away. 'Let it pass. We are going to live in the country. But, since you are so thoroughly aware of my daughter's morbid propensities, I shall be obliged if you will wrestle with them as far as in you lies. Brooding on such subjects is not at all good for a young girl, and is apt to stunt her growth.'

'Much you care!' thought Amy, as he turned and left her sole occupant of the smoking-room. 'You are too selfish. As for poor Dulce, she is your daughter, every bit of her. What is fine-looking in a man often runs to ugliness in a woman, and I shouldn't be surprised if you were as sensual as they make them, although you don't look it!'

Next day they were all sitting in the lounge after

déjeuner, ready for the drive to the Gare du Nord. The room was full. Everybody had a newspaper in their hands and a vaguely wandering bored eye. It was one of the horrible, dreary, unmomentous moments of life.

Dulce fawned on her governess us usual, having dragged her to a seat far removed from her mother, from whose chair Mr. Dand's was also at some little distance. There was thus a diffused sprinkling of Dand interest about the room, and the eyes of several people were on this eccentric and rich English family. The height and size of Mr. Dand alone made him remarkable and his quiet arrogance fascinated everyone.

He divided the interest, however, with another man, who sat alone at one of the tables and sipped his coffee, idly fingering newspapers that he hardly seemed to read. His hand fell across the English paper that had been sent to the Dands and that they had left about. Soon he was perusing it absently. A big, well made, bearded man, unalert, but powerful. His hand attracted Amy, it was large, capable, a master hand, it had more character than his face.

Dulce whispered to Amy, 'Miss Steevens, that's the fourth co-respondent! Doesn't he look wretched?'

'Sh-h!' breathed Amy, and looked, taking Sir Mervyn Dymond in superficially at a glance, as was her wont. 'He doesn't look at all that kind of man,' she thought. 'But then they never do.'

Having hushed Dulce, she looked again, under cover of *La Patrie* and continued her deductions. 'There is a kind of power in that face,' she decided, because she wished to find power there. 'The kind of man who does not care to talk about his conquests. And no longer young. But that makes no difference. What a cat the woman must be, to turn on him like this!'

For in the paper he was studying it was fairly set down that Lady Meadrow had, as it were, turned husband's evidence and a since withdrawn confession had set the first light to Sir Flaxley's jealousy. 'One never can tell,' thought Amy, 'when there are so many *cos*, which of them it is the woman wants to be merely divorced off, and which she intends shall marry her in the end? I wonder?'

She never knew what told her, what impelled her, how the knowledge came to her, what form of wireless telegraphy enabled the man's anguish to set up a receiving station in the consciousness of an unimportant stranger, and so despatch to her the message of the sudden crisis of his agony. As far as Amy's eyes served her she did see that big white hand clutch the corner of the newspaper, and nail it to the table. He rose. He looked at nobody. He left the room. She knew as well as if he had shouted it out to the whole roomful of people that he was going away to try to put an end to himself.

Amy took the decisive step of her life. She knew that life does go in great moral jerks for which there can be no previous preparation. She followed him.

The expression on the faces she left behind her were various. She had time to observe them all before she went, in a flash quick as that which comprehends the whole of a drowning man's life assessment. Jeremy Dand looked amused, Mrs. Dand horror-stricken, Dulce puzzled, and the lines of their features at this juncture were forever graven on memory's mirror for her; as brisk, grave, efficient in her short-skirted travelling dress she walked out of the big, glass-walled room. The windows were sticky with heat and the air of it filmy with dust. That she remembered too, so that hotel lounges were odious to her in future.

She followed him into the lift, and took her place therein beside him. She did not look at him. He had the newspaper crumpled up in his hand. When the lift stopped, he forgot his manners and passed hastily out in front of her, neither knowing nor caring whether she intended to descend on that particular floor or not. A man who is but dead, cannot think of such details. Amy lost sight of him as he disappeared down a corridor and only recovered the trail by a sleuth-hound instinct she could command on occasion.

She found herself on the threshold of his room, and he was standing in front of the mirror over the mantelpiece, with the muzzle of a revolver in his mouth. The fellow to it shone in an open portmanteau on the floor.

Amy knew that a clutch of his arm or even a scream would probably drive him to pull the trigger of the weapon. She thought of herself for one moment spattered with the blood of a big man dying at her feet, and then she said drily, in her usual voice:

'Please don't do that!'

She had succeeded.

His arm dropped slowly and he turned and saw a young, slim, plainish woman standing on the threshold of his room.

'Who are you?' he asked, with an accent on the middle word.

'Nobody. Mrs. Dand's maid. But I couldn't see a man go straight upstairs to shoot himself without raising a finger to stop him.'

Sir Mervyn Dymond said nothing. He sank into a chair and Amy advanced with cordial cheerfulness.

'Now I'll go downstairs again. It's over. You'll be quite calm now. May I take that thing with me?' She laid her hand on the pistol.

Sir Mervyn made no answer, but there was a low chair near his, and laying his other hand on hers:

'Sit down!' he commanded.

She remained standing, held by his arm in a stooping position, looking gravely down on him. 'I had rather not. I simply must go downstairs again, before—please give it me.'

'Certainly not. Sit down.'

'I suppose I shall have to,' said Amy resignedly, 'but if I don't go back, and pretty sharp too, there will be a lot of talk. Everybody saw me follow you, worse luck! Oh, I do wish you would let me go! Be reasonable! Gentlemanly, even!'

'Gibes are nothing to a man in my condition. And imagine asking a man who has been driven to madness by the most dastardly slurs and slanders against his honour to be reasonble?'

'It is a slander, then?' said Amy, carelessly, as she sat down on the edge of the chair, her cunning eye on the pistol.

'No, it's true. God forgive me. Now you had better go, and let me get on. You see yourself that it's the only thing for me to do.'

'Not at all. There are heaps of less selfish things to do. You can go into the witness box and swear——'

'To a lie?'

Amy shrugged her shoulders. 'A man must lie, to save a woman. You had no right to admit it even to me just now, but then you are not quite yourself. And besides, you should have thought of the lie you'd have to tell at first. An intrigue always means a few dishonourable things to be done for honour's sake—crooked honour, I call it!'

'You seem to have thought it all out?'

'It's elementary. But now look here, Sir Mervyn, I must not get talking to you—can't I have that pistol and go?'

'No you cannot. You must finish the work you have begun.'

'You are very selfish, Sir Mervyn,' said Amy, who felt unable, somehow to let go of his title. 'Mrs. Dand will certainly dismiss me if I stay up here much longer in a man's bedroom. They all saw me go after you. It looked too awfully bad! No employer could be expected to stand it! And yet you *will* keep me here——'

'Who is Mrs. Dand?'

'Mrs. Jeremy Merion Dand, whose maid I have told you I am.'

'Nonsense, you can't be anybody's maid. You are an Amazon, a Valkyrie, you have the pluck of the——'

'I know I have,' said Amy modestly. 'And a nice fool I make of myself with it all. Following you——'

'Splendid recklessness!' pursued he, half to himself, 'but you will only hurt yourself with it—come to grief, somehow! People will impose on you, put upon you, use you to their own profit——'

'And while we are dawdling here discussing my character,' moaned Amy, 'it will be gone! Those cats in the salon won't leave me a shred to bless myself with. Oh, Sir Mervyn, do let me go!'

His hot hand clutched her cool arm, which the fashion of the day left entirely bare. 'If you leave me, I won't answer for the consequences. You might as well never have followed me upstairs.'

'That's a mean way of getting at me,' said Amy angrily. 'And what do you mean? I can't stay up here with you all day!'

'Why not? You cannot leave me like this. It would be manslaughter.'

'How absurd, how childish you are,' said Amy. 'And it shows you are all right now, for you are making jokes. How can I stay with you? Do show some sense, and if, as you say, you are the least grateful to me for saving your life, don't try to ruin mine. I can't stay here, and what is more, I won't.'

'You can stay. You will. If there's any difficulty about it, I can marry you. By Jove, I'll do it, if it's only to keep you here.'

'And I won't be kept here, and I won't marry you.' Amy almost screamed.

He took his hand away.

'Go then. You are warned. You know what will happen, the moment that door closes behind you?'

Amy began to cry, for, oddly enough, she believed him.

'Tears!' he exclaimed, affected by the sight. 'I can't stand a woman's tears—not yours, anyhow. What am I to do? Let you go?'

'I won't go now—not without the pistol, at any rate.'

'Here you are then! And you had better secure the other too. Now go cheerfully out of my life, which you can consider you have given me back. Much good I shall do with it!'

'You can do this with it, go home and go into the witness box, and deny everything!'

'Is that what you ask me to do, for your sake?'

'Not for my sake, but for the sake of all women—we all ought to stick together and wrest things from you men,' said Amy, without thinking what she was saying, as she took the pistol from his hand and replaced it beside its shining fellow. She was not surprised, she knew men and had received a last sigh on a battlefield, that as she turned to say good-bye, he asked her to kiss him.

'Certainly,' she said kindly, 'you have been very good.'

As he raised his head from her forehead, they were both aware of the presence of the head waiter, apologetic but businesslike, who stood on the threshold of the open door with a note in his hand.

'Mademoiselle! . . .' he murmured, handing it.

Amy broke it open. A cheque fluttered out.

'From Mrs. Dand. I told you so,' she exclaimed. 'Listen! *"Amy Steevens, I can't possibly have you with my child as I had intended after this extraordinary piece of behaviour. It serves me right for picking up chance people. Your coming back to England with us is out of the question. Everybody saw you follow that man out of the room, and the waiter says you went straight up to his bedroom. I enclose a cheque."*—damn her cheque!—*"for a month's salary, and good-bye."*'

'You read very well and with fine strong emphasis! You can be my secretary,' said Sir Mervyn grinning, to Amy who stood with a blank face, holding Mrs. Dand's scrawl in her hand. . . .

'They are gone, madame,' the waiter said respectfully, foreseeing further and perhaps lucrative developments from his point of view, and with an awkward smile, left the room.

CHAPTER III

At nine o'clock, one windy evening in March a slow sure crawling four-wheeler grated against the kerbstone in front of a house in Cavendish Square. Amy Steevens got out of the cab, with the furtive air of a person who is being followed. A newsboy, bearing the latest intelligence, was crying it aloud at intervals. With intense curiosity he watched Amy gather up her skirts and pay the cabman his just fare and no more, and then, raising his voice he cruelly and cunningly chose that moment to proclaim his wares.

'Speshul! Sir Mervyn Dymond in the box! Sensation! Speshul!'

Everybody knew the tenant and owner of the notorious house whose steps Amy was now tripping up. The cabman, spurred on by the vociferous street Arab, and the just—too just—fare, leaned down from his box, and in the raucous voice of gin and spite, enquired of the shrinking, disgusted Amy:

'Shall I come and fetch you 'ome to-morrow morning, missie?'

But Amy's latchkey had by that time found its billet and Amy had disappeared into a still gulf of blackness illumined only by the ill-maintained gas globe behind the fanlight over the door. She quickly passed upstairs, over wide steps shrouded in dull drugget, to her own room—the best in the house, next to the study and Sir Mervyn's room. Sir Mervyn's chief secretary, Mr. Johnson, had two rooms on the topmost flight. These two

persons now ministered to the secretarial wants of the once busy, but now broken man, whose official emoluments, whose social privileges were passing away from him. In the course of the Meadrow divorce case, now running, some other significant phases in the life of this erratic, morbid, overweening personage had come out. Amy knew now why he had attempted suicide in Paris and questioned her wisdom in preventing him from carrying out his plan. For what else was left to the poor Don Juan in these days of his disgrace? Brilliant, without being solid, clever without real intellectual force, he relied for his stimulus on public approbation and the light of ladies' eyes, for he was emphatically their man. Women had helped him to the place he had attained and had then hysterically undone their fatuous nominee. There was no word too bad for him. He had lost ground with all alike.

Amy found him as she had expected, sitting in an armchair over the fire in the study, his head fallen between his shoulders in the conventional attitude of dejection. Amy, the sincere, the rough, the downright, set him down as affected even in his supreme moments. He was the kind of man who never could have appealed to her. Vainly the young Amazon sought the secret of his charm for her sex in the ugly, ageing man of sixty.

'Is that you, Amy?'

'Yes,' she replied, wearily, then with a spurring of assumed interest, 'Well?'

'I am ruined, Amy.'

'Oh, don't talk like that! *She* is, poor thing!'

'No, she will pull through. Her set will come to her rescue. I have done my part. She will be all right, but I, Amy, my career——'

'Surely,' burst out Amy, as if she were not English

herself, 'English people are not such fools! If you were valuable to the government once, you surely are so still!'

She seated herself at a wide desk, and pulling some notes towards her, began to write, aimlessly, while Sir Mervyn maundered on:

'I know them. They will assuage their consciences on me—treat me as they treated W——.' He named a well known politician.

'We shall see,' Amy muttered, with her pencil between her teeth.

'We shall not see! said Sir Mervyn, more loudly and with so decided an accent that Amy, who usually ignored all threats of suicide, raised her head as if to speak, and then thought better of it. He seemed to expect no comment, he knew her well enough to forego protestations from the woman who had saved his life once, and had given him her own into the bargain. He went on talking to himself. She caught her own name now and then—'Poor Amy!' She judged it well to take that up, after it had recurred several times.

'Amy is not poor,' she said gently. 'She has a very good salary.'

'All the same poor Amy! Sacrificed—exploited by one form of man's selfishness after another. You always will be, do you hear?'

'Nonsense! I am quite free.'

'Free, no, you are bound at every turn by your own generosity—your wish to be of use—your indomitable altruism. You have been my good angel, Amy, and at what a sacrifice! I don't believe there is another woman in the world who would have done what you have done, without at least the spur of passion, or interest?'

'Please don't.'

'You have spoilt your career for a man whom you don't even pretend to love.'

'I like to be exceptional!' Amy explained, laughing feverishly. 'Who cares to be one of a crowd.'

He would not be diverted to a lighter view of things.

'Yes, I made you come here, in my selfish madness—put you into such a dubious position that no jury or British matron would believe you innocent for a single moment. You will never get another situation. "Secretary to the notorious Sir Mervyn Dymond! . . . That disgraceful trial, you know . . . False position! . . . No doubt of it . . . Man of his lax views!" I hear them! All that I can do—for I realise, Amy, that it is my duty to provide for you——'

'If you leave me money,' said Amy, cheerfully, 'it will quite disgrace me!'

'I have thought of that, and it is laid there ready for you in the right-hand drawer of that buhl table and you are to go straight to that drawer, and take it when I die, before the minions of the law can come on and scratch up every thing. I shall cut up pretty well, I fancy, and I have no relations to speak of and those I have haven't stuck to me, so you need have no hesitation about taking it. Promise you will, Amy?'

'Yes, if I can think of it,' said she carelessly. 'I might happen to be a little cut up too!'

'A pun, now!'

'Why not? This isn't a particularly tragic occasion, that I know of? And do let me earn my salary, anyway. Will they want you to-morrow at that place?'

'They may want me, but they won't get me.'

'Well, then, let us get on with the index and to-morrow I will ask Mr. Johnson to put me up to some of these references.'

'I am too tired to trouble with the index now,' said Sir Mervyn sternly. 'Will you kindly give me my pill!'

She neglected to observe that he did not after all take a pill out of the box she handed him, but something from a phial which went quickly back into his waistcoat pocket. He was fond of quack nostrums, so the vision would not have disturbed her. Amy stood still a moment after she had put the box back, stretching her arms. She said, tentatively, for she hoped he would allow her to go:

'I think I shall go to bed, I am thoroughly done!'

He petitioned her to stay, as she had dreaded that he would. 'No, don't go just yet. Turn out the light and sit awhile—behind my chair, just as you are. I like to think that you are there. . . . Amy, what are you, what is at the back of you? Enlighten me!'

'How do you mean, Sir Mervyn?'

'What is your mainspring—what drives the extraordinary little piece of mechanism that you are? You don't work for your own bat, and you have no one to work for? You are alone in the world.'

'Everyone is,' she returned. 'Even though they have a cartload of relations. I have a mother, too. I sent her her allowance yesterday.'

'That's all your mother does for you. But you are right, *Personne ne connait personne,'* said he. *'Cada persona e un monda,* says the Portuguese proverb. There's more in you, Amy, than I have been lucky enough to find, and yet I have had the pleasure of seeing you day by day, for so long——!'

'Old flirt!' thought Amy.

'I have been fairly kind to you, have I not, Amy? Apart from the initial villainy of losing you your nice respectable place, and forcing you to come here, I have behaved honourably to you?'

'Perfectly honourably, Sir Mervyn.'

'But no one will think so. A man of my character! You live in my house, you are not a good secretary, your writing is too large. Johnson says so, he is jealous, though he knows perfectly well that you are quite straight. I wish Johnson would marry you?'

'I don't. I like Mr. Johnson well enough, but not——'

'Will you ever marry, I wonder?'

'Will I ever be struck by lightning, or in a railway accident? It doesn't do to worry or think of anything like that.'

'I offered to marry you.'

'Only to get me to come here. It was most good of you, but you see, I preferred to come without.'

'Yes, and dish yourself. Amy, you'll always be dished by somebody. Don't let anyone else dish you . . . . Amy . . . ' His voice grew indistinct, 'Amy . . . I wish . . . I wish I had loved you . . .' The querulous voice died away.

'How like him,' thought Amy, 'The professional lover!'

But she bore him no malice, he had as he had said, behaved fairly well to her, and her coming here had not turned out so ill. She had learnt something, and earned a good deal. Mrs. Dand was an uncertain lady, who probably would have thrown her over sooner or later, since her husband, whom she adored, evidently disapproved of his wife's new importation and thought that they were carrying a bad bargain back to England with them. And indeed Life was such a tangled skein that one need never hope to find the clue wherewith to unwind it, and such a rush that there was no time to stop by the roadside to tie up one's moral shoe latchet. It was as the poet says, a mingled warp—good and ill together and Amy secretly liked the odd variegations of the pattern, and did not care

to question the colours that might be fortuitously introduced into the web of it. Chance, blind chance, was master of us all, and courage and cheerfulness the only possible weapons wherewith to combat Fate and the inherent perversity of things. She was not fond of Sir Mervyn, she pitied him, and her charity stood her in lieu of sympathy. Their two temperaments were widely opposed. A rake to Amy was an invalid—a victim of a peculiarly revolting malady. She wondered what it was that foolish self-indulgent society women saw in this man, who scourged them with rods of their pleasure and got them into the courts and left them struggling there, for departing name and fame.

He did not speak, but neither did he breathe heavily, or suggest that he slept or rested in any way. Amy was too tired to wonder, but laid her head on her arms over the desk in front of her like any Board school child and slept.

When Amy awoke, and tried to shake off the slough of sleep, the better part of the night was over, though it was not yet day. The fire was out, of course, but the great tall globe of electric light just outside the house illumined the room for a little way in, but did not shine as far as the chair where Sir Mervyn sat, with the crest of his still plentiful grey-brown hair visible over the back of it. Amy was driven to struggle to her feet more by the sensation of extreme cold than anxiety. She tried to reach the nearest switch, but ran her side against the sharp corner of the table and rocked a moment in agony. Then, mastering her pain, she limped round to the front of the chair.

Sir Mervyn was dead. She knew he was dead the moment her hand touched his forehead. Without further attempt to find the switch she turned and ran in the direction of the door of the room. Horror and fright had made her primitive and she forgot the modern conveniences at

her service. Growing breathless, she ran upstairs and knocked at Mr. Johnson's door with fierce intent, but could produce in her flurry only the feeblest of rat-tats. She had to open the door at last, put her head in, and address the corner of the room where she imagined the secretary's head to lie. Her voice was sharp and clear.

'Wake up, Mr. Johnson. Sir Mervyn is dead. Come.'

Johnson woke, and flung out of bed, calling after her, 'I'm coming. Whatever you do, don't touch him.'

Amy found out what that meant later, at the inquest in which she had to play a far larger part than she liked. In fact they would not let her alone. Mr. Johnson who did not like Miss Steevens, could not get it out of his head that she had been quite unnaturally calm that morning when she had put her head in at his door and announced Sir Mervyn's death to him, and his state of doubt subtly was communicated to the minds of the coroner's jury. Nobody could touch her, though, her answers were too straight, and an empty phial of something murderous was found in his waistcoat pocket.

The little unpleasantness only fed the cumulative disdain which Amy's hard, ugly life had inculcated in her. She knew, though no one else did, that she had saved Sir Mervyn once from the act of suicide, and it was too much to expect her to do it twice. Personally, also, she did not feel sure that voluntary self annihilation was not all that had remained to Sir Mervyn. He was a broken man, he could not be mended, the scrap heap was the only place for such an obvious piece of social detritus as he had become.

CHAPTER IV

Amy did just remember the sum of money which Sir Mervyn had told her was lying ready for her in a drawer of an escritoire in the study, but as matters fell out she was never able to ascertain the sum of his generosity and forethought. Mr. Johnson, somehow or other, contrived to make it impossible for her to enter the room again, twenty-four hours after the chief's decease.

'He said I should always be dished by somebody!' she thought ruefully. 'And he's done it first. Why on earth didn't he give the money to me in my hand before he took the stuff that finished him?'

She left the house in Cavendish Square as soon as it was possible to do so, leaving no address, and went into lodgings in Kensington.

She heard afterwards, through Sir Mervyn's solicitor, who had seen her for a moment and taken a fancy to her, a rather interesting fact. Sir Mervyn had directed in his will that a substantial sum should go to Mr. Johnson on condition that he married Miss Steevens. Miss Steevens laughed and told him that there was no fear of that.

And she was right. Mr. Johnson preferred to go without the money to marrying Miss Steevens, that was his testimony in regard to the events that had taken place during his stay under Sir Mervyn's roof with the young lady in question.

A literary man and a Bohemian, he had yet enough worldly wisdom and masculine vanity to set a higher value

on himself than was implied in his willingness to marry Sir Mervyn's—Amy realised what he thought of her, and considered it natural under the circumstances. Sir Mervyn was at no time discreet, and in Amy's case had taken no pains to protect a secret that did not exist, or to safeguard a reputation he had not cared to endanger. He would consider, if he thought about it at all, that their entirely innocent relations called for no such elaborate precautions as those he was never tired of taking in the interests of his frail victims of the great world.

His valiant effort to provide his plain protégée at one and the same time with money and a husband had failed, as any plan so stagey was sure to do, and Amy thought she had some right to be annoyed.

She had, however, no time to brood over the little windfall she had missed. She must get something else to do at once, she had not too much cash on hand. Her mother's claims on her had lately been heavy. She must find a lucrative berth, a more respectable one if possible than the last, and find it soon.

Meantime she dressed nicely, she fed herself properly, she did not dare to go about sharp nosed, hungry eyed, with flat heeled dragging feet, she realised well enough that the battle is to the strong and situations to the smiling. She could not however hope to keep up the sly appearance of prosperity for as long as the frank confession of indigence. She made one good meal a day, but avoided the aërated breadshop, that pitfall of the female impecunious. She did not care for set luncheons, but found an apple and a biscuit in the middle of the day enough to sustain life and looks on. She liked to eat out of doors, in church-yards or the Park, where the world-worn faces of the loafers, and the spiced prettiness of the society women, alike amused her, and gave her substance for re-

flection with her dessert. She did not smoke. She did not require soothing, and could not afford cigarettes. Besides, her teeth were too pretty to spoil.

She passed through Kensington church-yard one day about two o'clock and the suffusion of colour produced by much red baize warned her that a wedding was imminent. Amy had a weakness for weddings. She meant, if ever she entered the bonds of matrimony, to be married according to the church ceremony in its entirely, not so much on religious as on artistic grounds. She considered it pretty and poetical, and old-fashioned, she meant to have all the pomp and circumstance that combine to leaven and smooth over the ratification of what constituted at least a very solemn bargain in her eyes. The voice that breathed o'er Eden should breathe over her. Vergers should bow and scrape and, as soldiers march into battle led by caparisoned officers and to the sound of trumpets, so should her small onset into the arena of life be heralded and glorified.

With the Ribstone pippin she had just bought deftly concealed in the palm of her hand, she approached the proud verger.

'Friends?' he questioned.

Amy gratefully accepted the taeit compliment to her attire, but modestly disclaiming his suggestion, passed into a humble rearward pew, where she was able to consume her luncheon—skin and all—she had polished it first with her handkerchief—while the church filled.

Dreary prim-lipped persons of both sexes wandered in, sandwiched between frivolous society dames, and squires. The latter were a little cowed perhaps by the dimness and the unwonted surroundings. All were marshalled, by beautiful young men with white buttonholes, into this side of the aisle or that according to a social system well under-

stood of the temporary guides. Amy understood, too, that it was according as they claimed relationship with this party to the alliance or the other, and furthermore, that a fair division of country and town's people filled the right and left aisles respectively.

'It's either a country gentleman marrying a London girl or the other way round?' thought Amy, 'for one side is rather smart and fast—I seem to see a man I saw once at Sir Mervyn's—and the other side is dowdy and well-born, if not well bred.'

The organ burst into music and the little white chorister boys passed up the aisle. Amy beamed with quiet pleasure. Behind them a pretty tall girl, with rather a peevish expression, came ambling slowly along, walking at the only pace a heavy train permits, on the arm of a fond and rubicund old gentleman. She attained the rail where the bridegroom, invisible to Amy through palms and bonnets, had been long waiting for her, and the ceremony began.

Although Amy could not, even by craning, catch a glimpse of the man, yet she could hear him well, and a wave of uninterested recollection crossed her as she heard him clearly promise to support Edith Isabel through thick and thin generally, according to the terms of the service. She wondered whom it was that this Edith Isabel was in her turn promising inaudibly to stick to. The point was solved for her when the newly married couple passed on their way down the aisle to 'begin their new life.'

She realized then it was the man's second venture. He was tall and large in make, his lips were closed in a firm Napoleonic pout, his grey eyes were remote, retiring, bored—they said, as usual, 'I would rather be with my dog, my books, my pipe!'

It was her old master. Amy could have touched him. She put down her veil and followed the smart people out.

'He won't love this one any more than he did the other!' was Amy's reflection next day. She had turned in at a Free Library to find a paper and con the details of the ceremony. 'I wonder why he troubled to marry again? That longed for son, I suppose! And my Mrs. Dand's death—I must have missed that somehow!'

Her eyes rested again on the brief statement. 'George Jeremy Merion Dand to Edith Isabel, only daughter of Sir Flaxley Meadrow.'

The man with the whiskers! The bedizened Mamma in the front pew! The new Mrs. Dand was the daughter of that woman who had only kept in society as it were by the skin of her teeth and through Sir Mervyn's sturdy denials of facts that everyone knew to be facts.

'It seems to me that I might have said that I *was* "Friends" after all,' thought Amy, 'friends of both, for after all, if it hadn't been for me, Sir Mervyn wouldn't have gone into the witness box at all! And I suppose Dulce was bridesmaid—one of that hideous shy lumping six? I didn't recognise her, but how is one to tell, the ridiculous way they get nice inoffensive girls up! Dulce as a Romney!'

Among the list of guests at the reception was a Mrs. Guy Riven, who had presented a silver Queen Anne posset cup.

'Coals to Newcastle,' thought Amy, remembering Jeremy Dand's craze for old silver, 'but I expect he will discover half of them to be fake and exchange them. He's all for business.'

Mrs. Riven's name would not have interested Amy any more than any other one of the string of well known and

fashionable names who graced the breakfast in Palace Gardens with their presence, if it had not been that in the same issue of the Kensington News, Mrs. Guy Riven happened to be advertising for a companion.

The Dands interested her slightly: Mrs. Riven was a friend of the Dands. Amy's spirit of adventure was uppermost as she put her veil on straight and looped it under her chin, buttoned every button of a new pair of gloves, and went to see if she would do for Mrs. Riven. That lady's apparently faint connection with some of the characters out of one of her old lives, took away from the strangeness a little.

CHAPTER V

Amy's new employer, Mrs. Guy Riven, went to her old manor house on the East Coast for the autumn, and entertained a vast succession of guests. Amy was found to be indispensable. Under her rule comfort, not ordinary comfort, but superlative comfort, reigned. Mr. Riven had died wealthy; there was plenty of cash for Amy to work with. She spent it handsomely on the widow's behalf, but she gave good measure of her own commodity, her time, her alacrity, her forethought. Personally, she was well and not bored. She liked the cold pure airs of the North, and the strength of the East Coast waves. She bathed, she motored, she rode, she flirted.

The son of the house, home from Eton for his holidays, loved Amy with the whole force of his school-boy being. He was but sixteen, but by his mother and her friends already considered sufficiently encroaching and upsetting to women by reason of his hearty, boyish charm. He was not handsome, but freckled, redhaired and curly.

'If you'll just put your hand on my head, Amy,' he would say, 'you will feel every single hair standing up against you. Do try. It's a funny feeling. The only other girl,' he added, 'that I have loved was always doing that. She was the matron in the sanatorium at Westgate, where I went when I had scarlet fever at school. Poor Pussy, I was fond of her. Of course I never see her now. I'll show you one of her letters.'

Her letters touched Amy.

'*Write, dearest, and tell me all you are doing. Send me your photo on a postcard, I should value it so much.*'

'I did.'

'I would keep it on my mantelpiece and look on your dear face twenty times a day. I feel I shall never again have that pleasure.'

'Yes, poor Pussy,' said the lad in his clear unemotional boy's voice. 'She used to sit up with me, and oh! how ugly she used to look in the mornings!'

'That isn't chivalrous of you, Philip.'

He accepted her blame with meekness. He was too young to be able to stow his different attachments in emotion-tight compartments. He wished to fling all the brief memories and hardly recognised loyalties of his short life into the lap of the goddess of the present, the lady he intended to marry when he had gone through Eton and Oxford.

Amy, laughing, used to gaily refuse this sweetly impossible offer of marriage. Yet she was conscious all the while of a sense of elation, as if a man, not a boy, had proposed to her. Under her neat chaff, her pretty scoldings, her light handling of him, was a tenderness, a vaguely stimulated emotion that made tears come into her eyes sometimes when she stood at one of the windows of the old house, pressing her face against the pane and watching a *svelte* angel in flannels playing tennis on the scanty seaside lawn. What was it? Love in one of its many forms? She did not know. She was content with the boy's sweet, simple caresses, his brief, birdlike kisses, possessing none of the properties of passionate love-making —nothing grim, cloying, or intense. He embraced her— he squeezed her tightly, as if it was part of a game, or as a child grasps a favourite toy. 'Oh, you hurt me, Philip!' she had exclaimed once, and he had flung away from her pettishly.

'Hurt you! That! Oh, you're not half a girl!'

These embraces that reeked of the playground, did not seem to Amy worth taking a high line about, and if anyone had told her that she was corrupting or even unduly bringing forward the boy, she would have laughed and told them that he was innocent of the arts of manhood as yet, overflowing with positive sentiment, not latent sensuality.

Tears were very near his eyes. On the morning fixed for his return to Eton, it was arranged that Amy was to go a little way down the cliff road that led past the house but in the opposite direction to the station. With the great family leavetaking in the hall he wished 'Us' to have nothing to do, she must stay out of doors till it was over and not spoil 'Our parting.'

Amy always remembered the wide white glistening road, like the inside of a shell, and the shade of the lonely outhouse door she leaned against, to wait for him. She listened to the desolate cow that mo-oed inside, her eyes rested on the flagged stones of the path, with their fringed margin of grass, that led back to the Manor House, and the wide road it bordered. He was to come along that road. She felt good-humoured, easy-going, not so sad, it was only a schoolboy going back to school and he would be having Christmas holidays at their house in town in a few months. Yet her features grew tense and the flagstones danced, till she saw the straight little black figure, languid and heavy-footed with sorrow, advancing towards her. She left her sheltering cowhouse, and advanced into the middle of the track. She had a parcel of groceries in her hand.

He came up to her. They were of a height. He took hold of her by the shoulders masterfully, and pressed his body close to hers. She was so taken aback that she dropped her parcel.

'Good-bye! Good-bye! Darling! Oh, dash it, I'm crying.'

They clung together, regardless of cows and milkmaids, in the middle of the shining way, and in the cold morning light their pure flame of mutual love mounted like a lark into the blue.

'It will be six years before I can marry you.'

He pulled out a large clean handkerchief and stood away from her a little. The question of years did not concern Amy, innocent as she was of all views for the future. Six years—he would forget her in six weeks, but meantime the joy of that innocent affection and its heartfelt demonstration was to remain with her and soothe her all her life.

'Good-bye, Amy! Amy, I'll write.'

'Of course you'll write. So will I.'

'I shall keep all your letters, Amy, and carry them about with me.'

'Yes, dear, as many as you can without spoiling your figure!'

'Oh, Amy, don't, don't chaff! I believe I can manage eight at a time. Good-bye! Good-bye, my love! Good-bye!' He punctuated his valedictory utterances with kisses. They were rougher and more boyish, not like the silent rapture of the earlier embrace. Then he was gone—a slim dark streak on the dazzling whiteness of the pearly morning world.

CHAPTER VI

For weeks she thought of Philip Riven eagerly, continuously, absorbingly, just as if he had been a real lover.

'I believe I am in love with the wretched boy!' she said to herself scornfully, wonderingly, going about her business as usual. It was an interesting problem for her to think about at night when she had seen to everything, felt rather tired, and had written Philip a nice little patronizing letter suitable for a boy of sixteen to receive from his mother's housekeeper. The extraordinary predilection for him of which she was conscious was for self-consumption alone, it would never do for the object of it to suspect such a thing. Strong meat for babes indeed! And for herself, she took long walks to prevent her getting morbid.

The boy's letters grew colder. She took shorter walks.

About six weeks after his return to school, Mrs. Riven came in cross and tired from her motor drive. She had been to spend the day at a place a good many miles off, with a certain Lady Meadrow, whose name Amy knew well, though she said nothing. She didn't see Mrs. Riven on her return, but it came to her ears that Mrs. Riven had bullied every servant she met on her way to her room, where she chose to dine off a tray, alone. In the evening she sent for Amy to come and talk to her.

Her figure was unbound, her purple hair unloosed. She lay poured out on a *chaise longue*. She said to Amy languidly:

'Sit down. I have just found out who you are."

'Who from, pray—granting that I am anybody?'

'A man I met at Lady Meadrow's. I can see through your change of a few letters in your name. Steevens, he said. Well, you put a p in, but it doesn't blind me. I guessed at once. I didn't split on you. He told me, moreover, in confidence, that you are the girl he ought to have married!'

'And why didn't he, pray?'

'His patron wanted him to, left him money to, but he couldn't bring himself to. Why, you are the girl—I read all about the case in the papers at the time, but forgot about it when dear Lady Meadrow got through all right! One really can't keep pace with all one's friends' *causes célebres*. But there it is, the disagraceful fact, you are the Miss Steevens that was living with Sir Mervyn Dymond at the time, and of course, as that Mr. Johnson said——'

'Mrs. Riven, you don't seem to be aware that you were talking to a cad?'

'Well, he's an author—not a man, and you could hardly expect a man, even for money, to marry a woman who—— Do you deny it?'

'Yes, I do deny it, but what's the good? You don't believe me.'

'Lady Meadrow denies it, too,' said Mrs. Riven drily, 'but then she's one of Us, and she got her case. But you—well, I think you should have hesitated before you wormed yourself into a house like mine. Though you're amusing enough, goodness knows!'

'I am sorry I have amused you. I only meant to do my work. I saw your advertisement and answered it. You saw me, you asked me for references. I told you I had none. You engaged me. I saw no reason why I should tell you my history, you would not have under-

stood, it was far too complicated for any smart woman to get on to!'

'It seems simple enough. Just wickedness, to go and live alone with a man of the very worst reputation on the excuse of being his secretary, and at the very moment when all London was ringing with his name!'

'And Lady Meadrow's.'

'Leave her name out, if you please.'

'Why should I? The papers didn't leave her out! She was the worst of the two. Apart from that particular vice, he was rather a fine fellow and did good work in Senegambia. I always sympathize with the people who are "down."'

'Down, yes, and deserved to be. He was only a parvenu, knighted for his services to the Government. And men can't be permitted to lead lives like that with impunity. I never would have him here, though my friend Lady Meadrow was always asking me to. And a suicide, too!'

'He died for *her*.'

'Nonsense! What else could he do but kill himself? He couldn't be rehabilitated—too old. He had got to be a regular old crock, as Philip would say. The women wouldn't have fought for him any more, and then that's the end. But, to come back to ourselves. You must see that I can't keep you here any more, with Philip so much about and rather inclined to notice you?'

'I shouldn't harm Philip.'

'Allow his mother to be the judge of that.'

'Perhaps it would be safer for him to fall in love with Lady Meadrow?'

'That's smart! Rude, but I'm never annoyed by anything that amuses me. Well, let me see, Philip is gone

for the present and I'm all alone. You may stay till the twenty-ninth of next month.'

'I prefer to go at once.'

'Nonsense, you can be useful to me, and the sea air does you good. You can be looking out for something at your leisure.'

'And amusing you, eh?'

'There you are! Yes, you do. You are such a quick retorter. And in consideration of which I shouldn't be surprised if I forgave you your little twopenny halfpenny past, so you say it is. And if it wasn't for Philip I daresay I'd keep you! You are the best hand at housekeeping I know. The thing goes on wheels now you are here. Yes, it will be best. And I'll apologize for the rather strong things I said. Well, you'll stay?' She smiled her well-known queenly smile.

'I'll stay till the twenty-ninth,' said Amy quietly, 'and perhaps you would like to see Philip's letter to me.'

Mrs. Riven's nose looked at once sharp and blue. 'You might have produced that before,' she remarked, adjusting her *pince nez*. Then she read, in a hard, uneducated voice:

'*Dear Amy,*

'*I've been a good long time in writing, haven't I? I have a new form master who won't allow any piffle and makes me work, and like to work, too. Clever of him, isn't it? But I could tell him it won't last. So I couldn't find a moment hardly, to think of you, for weeks, nor dream, for going to bed, dog-tired as we do, one doesn't dream.*

'*Now for saying something serious. I shall always look up to and value your friendship immensely highly, but I*

have been slightly worried lately over the thought of my own unstableness—which I know for a fact, after Pussy. *The truth is—I hope I am not vexing you much—though I do care for you very much, Amy dear, I don't care for you quite enough to marry you. There's nothing more to be said is there, after that, but ask you to forgive me, darling. I hope you won't object to that little darling, it got in by accident, and it does make such a mess to scratch it out. And I am truly fond of you.*

'Yours affectionately with kisses,

'Philip Riven.'

'There's your love letter,' said Mrs. Riven, handing it back to Amy. 'Many thanks for letting me see it. Did you want him to marry you?'

'Me, marry a boy!'

'It isn't nice to be thrown over even by a boy, is it?'

'No,' said Amy candidly; 'but of course I never dreamed——'

'The sordid word marriage never passed between you, eh? Fie, Amy! Did he ever kiss you?'

'Yes; why not? I am full eight years older.'

'And did you feel quite full eight years older? This is very interesting to a student of human nature like myself. Well, it was decent of you to show the letter to me—to humiliate yourself in my eyes. And after that, you expect me to let you stay altogether?'

'Dear Mrs. Riven, and you a student of human nature! I showed it to you to make you leave off asking me to stay.'

'Well, but suppose it doesn't have that effect, but the contrary one? Suppose I beg you to stay?'

'No.'

'Raise your screw?'

'You are very trying, Mrs. Riven,' said Amy. 'You know I'm poor. No, I'll not stay.'

'I didn't ask you, observe. I was just experimenting on you,' said the other woman haughtily.

'You like bullying, I see,' said Amy.

'Go on. Have I put your back up at last?'

'Yes, I think you are both cruel and heartless, and I can't understand how my dear Philip happens to be your son.'

'Her dear Philip! Listen to her!'

'Yes, I am very fond of him, but I shall never see him again. I am like poor Pussy——'

'Who is she?'

'A friend of Philip's. She said she felt she would never see him again when once she parted from him. I feel that, too. Perhaps it means that he will die!'

'I never said anything so cruel as that to anyone in all my life,' said Mrs. Riven. 'And you say it to his mother! You *are* revengeful! Go now, please, or I shall begin to hate you, and I mean, for convenience, to get on with you to the twenty-ninth.'

CHAPTER VII

The seldom-enlivened parishioners of the little parish of St. Mary's, Swarland, were excited one warm Sunday in May, by the sight of a new face in the Merion Dand pew in church. The newcomer was not much to look at, they settled at once; she was too tall, and thin, and pale. But she was well and quietly dressed, her clothes looked 'good,' she seemed to know how to behave herself, knelt and rose and sat in the proper places, stared at nobody, and altogether looked most devout and attentive. She would be a very good companion for the untidy heiress, the ugly, overgrown Miss Dand of Swarland.

Amy was thinking of many things, and her eye, though it roved quietly, and imperceptibly, took in and considered one by one the fellow occupants of her pew, which was of the old-fashioned square donkey-box shape. The only person she could not see well was her old pupil, Dulce Dand, who sat next her, with four pennies precariously poised on the seat beside her ready for the offertory. Opposite her was the master of the house, in his Sunday suit, plenteously fulfilling the duties of a man, a father, and a church-warden. He chanted, he made the responses, he knelt—'and yet,' thought Amy, 'he doesn't believe in a single thing!'

The very pretty young woman, richly but not well dressed, who knelt at his side was his wife; Amy had seen him married to her five years ago in Kensington church. She was Lady Meadrow's daughter. Lady Meadrow herself, painted, dyed, and feverishly clothed, sat at her daughter's right hand. Mrs. Bowman, the com-

manding, simply robed old woman who took up the whole of the north side of the pew, was Jeremy Daud's mother, who lived with them. Amy Stephens, as she now called herself, had only been in the house three days, but she was in the habit of using her eyes. In the juxtaposition of so many mothers, she foresaw mischief, broils, a lively household, and apprehended the host's subtle pride in the fact of his being able to hold so many conflicting elements in leash.

After leaving Mrs. Riven's, Amy had drifted for nearly four years. Her behaviour had been exemplary—her behaviour always was exemplary—but all the same she would have been unable to procure herself a 'character.' She had no credentials; her status was therefore that of an adventuress. As a matter of fact, those four varied years contained no single episode as romantic or dangerous as her three months' sojourn under the roof of Sir Mervyn Dymond. Amy had not enjoyed that or profited by it in any way. It simply came in the day's work. She was too old a stager to value questionable positions for their own sake. She wasn't a novelist, or an actress; she could make no use of the damning experience. But it was over, thank goodness, and she was unharmed. She worked away quietly, taking anything that came in her way. Without the usual moral passport, she could not hope for positions of trust. The hapless, the philanthropic, marked Amy's services for their own. She looked after a boys' club in the East End for a while, then she dabbled in something less pleasant, which opened her already wideawake eyes to a further extent. Then a manager's eye lighted on her, he thought she had something in her, and was minded to bring it out. He engaged her to play a small part during the run of a piece. Amy, as before, found the life of the stage very quiet, dull, and safe. It was easy for a

girl to keep herself respectable in a profession where you were diurnally toned down, tamed, and exhausted by rehearsals and hard work; where it was everybody's business to look after your morals and inaugurate clubs for you, while you were propped up by extraneous aid in the shape of anxious countesses on committees, expecting you to fall the moment their eye was off you.

Amy was too colourless, too evenly balanced, to make a good actress. Her heart was not in her work. The manager said she had not enough temperament. In pursuance of her policy of refusing no form of work, she dropped into the post of dresser to the leading lady, who had the quality Amy lacked in a superlative degree. Soon, as the result of some caprice of the very temperamental leading lady, Amy was at sea again, smiling and good-tempered, believing in her workaday star as ever.

A certain philanthropic association of blunderers known as the 'Betterment' Society discovered and utilised her undeniable talent for platform work. Lecturing in their hall one evening on a subject she felt strongly about, but had not deeply studied, she distinguished among the faces upturned to her and hanging on her words, the unforgettable, rather curious one of Dulce Dand, now a grown-up young lady.

They met when the lecture was over. Amy was just then possessed by a weird, wild fancy for a home; she was tired of one room at eight shilling a week, and her meals taken in a shop with a sanded floor. She brought her compelling magnetism to bear on her old pupil, with the result that Dulce decided that she could not live without Amy, and persuaded her amenable father to engage Miss Stephens as his daughter's permanent companion.

And here she was, sitting in the Dand family pew, a lost sheep, folded safely in the byre of one of our oldest

county families! Her conscience did not prick her in any way. There was no deception. Jeremy Dand had let her go in Paris for certain reasons; the reasons still applied, of course, but he had decided to pass them over. He had written her a nice letter to ratify the new engagement and offered her a good salary. His daughter was headstrong and spoilt, and must be indulged. Probably she did not get on with her step-mother, and this was the sop he had thrown her. The Dulce she remembered took a good deal of pacifying, and it was always worth while to keep her in a good humour.

Amy knew Mr. Dand's weakness. Perhaps he had been too lazy to tell Lady Meadrow's daughter the part that Dulce's new companion had played in her own history? Perhaps he did not realize it? Perhaps Lady Meadrow herself did not identify Amy Stephens with Miss Steevens, Sir Mervyn's secretary? Perhaps Mr. Johnson had confided his *mariage manqué* to Mrs. Riven only in confidence, when she met him at her friend, Lady Meadrow's? Perhaps Lady Meadrow had not always lived with her son-in-law? It was always 'perhaps.' Amy knew nothing. As she sat there she fancied herself sitting on a hundred mines, waiting for the match of an indiscreet confidence to blow them up.

No one, watching the quiet, pale, inward-eyed girl, could have had an inkling of her secret tremors, nor would they have realised from the direction of her glance that her whole attention was bestowed on the head of the family, who probably held the keys to her enigmas.

Amy had known him, so far, only as that curious anomaly, the Englishman abroad. In his present rôle of solid country gentleman, he puzzled her, as she sat staring at him and took him in, or flattered herself that she did so. Omniscience was her foible.

The obvious pattern of country virtues and respectabilities, she listened to his sonorous voice murmuring the responses, and asking his God to help him to keep certain laws, and could not help thinking of the titles of some of the books in the locked cases labelled G. in the library, that she had vaguely envisaged the day before. Had her place been beside him, she would have observed that he read off a Latin prayer-book, and she would have been still more puzzled.

Mr. Dand disappeared, reappeared in another place, and in a surplice, and proceeded to read one of the lessons impressively. But for the rest, it was a long, tedious service, and a strangely unilluminating sermon that good Mr. Judd, the Vicar of Swarland, gave them on this Sunday, the first of Amy's stay. Dulce's propped-up pennies fell, and were retrieved amid the audible reprehension of the young lady's paternal grandmother. Mrs. Bowman being the relict of two famous clerics, always treated the inside of a church as if it was her own drawing-room.

Then all was over; the solid meed of silver from the hands of the elders clanked in the dish . . . the harmonium voluntary bowed them out. The carriage was drawn up at the lych-gate for the two elder ladies and for Mrs. Dand, who although esteeming herself a good walker, did not think it would look well in the eyes of 'the villagers' for their 'Lady' to walk to and from divine service. Amy, nothing witting, followed the party out of church and saw with startled eyes the two ladies who had preceded her down the flagged walk being stowed carefully into the carriage by her old fellow-secretary, Alec Johnson!

Mr. Dand greeted him cordially. The motor had been sent in to Oldfort on purpose to bring him back. Thus

intimate was he in the house where the woman he seemed to have been tracking down had newly come to live! The villain of her piece!

Amy laughed at herself, while disgusted with the turn matters seemed to have taken. It was not easy to connect the word of melodrama and the frail little figure of her old fellow secretary, with the yellow face, the prevailing hectic spot on the high, Scotch cheekbones, the reddish eyelids, and the honey-coloured hair. Even the curious amalgam of Scotch and Cockney accent with which he spoke seemed to Amy domestic and reassuring. He acknowledged Mr. Dand's curt introduction to his daughter's new companion in a manner that left it doubtful whether or no he had ever shaken hands with Miss Stephens before. There was no art in that, however; it was symptomatic of the vagueness towards things in general, and especially towards the things that reputedly do not matter, which Alec Johnson had always affected. Books were more vital to him than persons, at least it was his pose to assume this. Not a dangerous man, not a gentleman! Amy could hardly accept him as a gentleman in view of that fatuous admission with regard to herself repeated by Mrs. Riven. Possibly, however, Mrs. Riven, a violent and excessive person, had misrepresented him? With the effete smart woman, any sort of juggling with words is possible. Amy had heartily determined never to speak to him again at the time, but when she made that stagey vow she had not contemplated the possibility of their running up against each other again so soon. She judged, too, from the cordiality of Mr. Dand's greeting that Mr. Johnson and she might chance to be thrown a good deal together. She wisely decided to begin as she would have to go on, be fairly civil to the man and hope for the best. She considered there would be no harm in asking a few lead-

ing questions of Dulce on their short walk home through the shrubberies.

'Tell me what that funny little Mr. Johnson does here?' she asked bluntly.

'Alec Johnson? He is father's greatest chum. You wonder how a clever man like my father cares to make a friend of him? So do I. Great men like a doormat. Johnson simply worships father, and stands all his tempers, and father is mean enough to accept the adoration of the meanest. It's one of the cheap, poor traits in his character.'

'But what does he do here? What is his profession?'

'He makes his living by secretarying for father. He has rooms in Oldfort, and works all day at the office under father's eye. Father trusts him. We are treated to him pretty often here. They send the motor in for him on Sundays and we have the pleasure of his company all day. Grandmother Meadrow discovered him; she had met him—more shame for her, she's been a wicked old woman! —at Sir Mervyn Dymond's, you know, her great friend. Alec was his secretary. Sir Mervyn had two, the old wretch; the other was a girl. She disappeared utterly after his death, I was told. Not by Mr. Johnson; he never will talk to me about her. I feel sure, though, I should have liked to have known her; she must have a story to tell? Oh! and let me add, lest you tread on his corns somehow, that Johnson is an author. Dad and he are writing a book together. They have invented a *nom de plume*.'

'What?' said Amy breathlessly. 'Jerry Johnson, or Dandy John?'

'You dear thing, how you are going to keep me amused! But look here—*assez* Johnson! Tell me what you think

of our brave Sunday show? Do you not admire our animated clothes-horse, our domestic *mannequin?*'

'Do you mean your step-mother?'

'Yes; I saw you looking at her all through the service. Sat instead of kneeling; never stood at all! Yet she's quite strong. She's got that little *air fatale* that goes with perfect health.'

'Why do you call her a mannequin?'

'Because she buys endless clothes and hangs as many of them as she can on her on Sundays. They never seem to belong to her any more than they do to the girls that try them on for her to see in the shops. No notion of dressing. Now, I frankly haven't the clothes instinct; I'm ugly, but she is pretty, and thinks she's a regular dab at dressing.'

'Is it your companion's duty to listen to you abusing your step-mother, just tell me, please?'

'Yes, for it is my safety valve. If I mayn't let off steam to you I shall go mad. So long as I am civil to her —I am, am I not?'

'Yes, you are quite ladylike.'

'So she thinks I like her and that father adores her, and isn't clever enough to see that he only tolerates her. You see, we have both made up our minds to feed her vanity by which she lives, and procure ourselves a quiet life by that means. It's the only way, and so you will find. You must really let me unburden my mind to you when I feel like it, and not shut me up. You know, dear, that's the reason I got you here; I knew I could talk to you. You have no tiresome prejudices, you are a-moral, like me. Nothing shocks me. I let people rave. They don't rave here, alas! One never hears a nice naked truth from one year's end to another. But you—why, you are up to everything. And you can give a perfectly gorgeous

lecture. I shall never forget that one I heard and that brought us together again. For one thing, I could see that you took such a perfectly reasonable view of the relations of the sexes.'

'Oh, the relations between the sexes!' said Amy contemptuously. 'That's just the part that bores me. People do seem to me to attach far too much importance to it all. Animals don't, except for a short while in spring. Why can't we be sensible like them, and not base all our actions and ambitions and well-being on the fact of our mating and whether we have mated right or not? Don't you suppose the man nightingale makes the best of it, and if she isn't quite the right little brown bird he would have liked to sing to, just shrugs his shoulders and says, "Sufficient for the season is the mate thereof"?'

'But you do think every woman ought to marry, don't you?'

'To mate,' said Amy, correcting her. 'And perhaps marry as well.'

'I know what you mean. To mate for love and marry for companionship, and so on?'

'Something like that,' replied Amy. 'But not to complicate the whole machinery of existence with the consequences of one little manifestation of energy, don't you know?'

'That's your lecture—its substance,' said Dulce eagerly. 'I can give it you nearly word for word. See how I adore you! You said that you thought love, like the rest of the important passions, should have its hour, its day, its year even, but should not be allowed to trespass on the space of all the others, and to lengthen itself out over the whole field of existence. You said "Love is very well, but there are other dreams, other interests. What of revenge? And ambition? Why should the one emotion,"

you said, "set the tune eternally? To be practical, why shouldn't an alliance of reason follow one of love? Why, because, at one time or another we happen to have submitted to a nearly inevitable law of our being, must the rest of our lives be dragged, protesting, through the miry channels of love? Why should children, the buds and flower of the crescendo, be exposed to the ugly view of the diminuendo just because their absurd, hidebound parents insist on remaining together after the impulse that produced them is spent? For the good of the children, it is said. Ill-judged martyrization! Pathological sights are not healthy to grow up among. Love must be, love must die, but bury it deep, and let there be no mourners, no flowers." That's nearly what you said.'

'I have changed my views a little since I had the cheek to give that lecture,' Amy replied gravely. The crude exposition of her theories on the lips of the morbidly eager, hopelessly plain young girl disgusted her; she knew not why. But she spoke up again presently; she would be true to her convictions.

'In the main,' she said, 'I do still think the demands made on that poor, hard-worked passion by the whole world are somewhat exorbitant. Why should any of us dare to look for more than one nightingale season, say, or perhaps two—that is, if we are specially cut out for that kind of thing? And for some of us it is lucky if we get a season at all! For some disappointed women, no bird ever sings, and those women would be the most *exigeante* if they did get him, and would shake the branch, nay, the whole tree, down to move him to a fuller tune!'

CHAPTER VIII

From nightingales to roast beef! The British Sunday lunch which ensued was almost new to Amy in its plenitude of development.

The child's clean lace pinafore, Mrs. Dand's smart but sober church frock, Mr. Dand's quiet suiting, were quite in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion. Leisure and plenty. Only the beef was tough, the Yorkshire pudding not light, the vegetables drowned in water. The old ladies murmured, and even complained. Mrs. Dand's calm indifference rebutted them. Mr. Dand ate very little, and did not add his voice to the chorus of accusation of a certain Mrs. Dawes, to whom, for some reason or other, Mrs. Dand seemed to cling. She either chose to back her own choice of a cook, or had herself no sense of taste. Amy judged the latter. She thought it went with the hostess's temperament; she was self-indulgent without being sensuous. Her egotism, combined with want of artistic perception it was, which made her blind to the signs of dissatisfaction in others. And there was something about Dawes the cook which Amy would make it her business to know by and bye.

After this monumental meal the participants, armed in country fashion with sedative books, each withdrew to her room. Miss Dand went to see to a sick dog; Amy was left alone for a moment with her host.

'This solid British comfort,' said he, 'isn't, I suppose, much in your line. Nor is it in mine. I am almost a vegetarian. Come into the library and smoke?'

'I don't smoke.'

'I wish Dulce didn't. But you may as well sit down. What do you think of this place?'

'Beautiful.'

'Turner did a drawing of it for my grandfather.'

'Not this house, surely?'

'No, this house is new. I built it. I used the old stones. You need not, therefore, consider me a Philistine. The house had sheltered the Dands and their vices, pleasant and otherwise, for hundreds of years; it was full of bad habits and preconceived ideas of immorality, it was insanitary, and not particularly good architecturally.'

'Still it was nice and old.'

'Old! Old! That fetich of romanticism! You would not preserve a dust-bin, or a cloaca, because it was Elizabethan, or Merovingian. No, I am hopelessly imbued with scientific modern ideas, and I must have the benefits of civilization—electric lighting and heating and encaustic tiles—the more so, as my wife is a bad manager. If it wasn't for scientific ameliorations of her, we should all go to pieces. What do you think of the cook?'

'She is a good roaster, but a bad boiler.'

'Precisely. Now, Edith would never ask you that. She has no sense of taste. It is all the same to her what she eats so long as it is soft—her teeth have been neglected. Now, I am a gastronome—a practical one. I can cook you an omelette—on the drawing-room table, if need be. Or have you ever eaten trout, caught by yourself, fresh out of the water, wrapped in paper and roasted on the river bank over some sticks?'

'It sounds delicious. But I have not patience to fish.'

'Women don't have,' he replied, pleased. 'You must come some day and watch me.'

'In that little, dark, secret stream that runs below the house,' said Amy eagerly, 'where the slabs of rock lie

half over the banks on either side, and seem to shut in and cover up the brown stream like eyelids?'

'Have you been down there already?'

'Yes, I am like a cat. I have to take in my domain thoroughly and prowl about before I settle down. But, I say, this house is a long way off from doctors and post offices!'

'Eighteen miles from Oldfort. It takes me exactly thirty-five minutes in the motor every morning. So, with the first toot of the horn I shake you all off—women, children, books, all the tent-pins that peg me down to domesticity—sail down the drive, and completely alter the focus, and lead the life of adventure from ten to six every day. That's what keeps me good-tempered.'

'I thought you were in Business?'

'I make it Adventure. You ought to understand that, you are a roving spirit, too. But you have not been here over one of my long absences as yet. I have slept, I should think, in every hotel in Europe in the service of my firm. I like travelling. I rest—where do you think I rest?—in the Orient Express, or the Trans-Siberian Railway, and gather up my sinews for the next spring, for the next deal, or clever compromise.'

'And all for money?' said Amy.

'Yes, money. I love money,' he said slowly. 'I don't mean the positive chink of gold, but the pride and glory of investments, the well-covered pages of bank-books! I'll invest some for you if you like?'

'I have got none,' said Amy shortly, and changed the conversation. There seemed no prospect of a break in the Sunday calm which had diffused itself over the house, so that it seemed as if in that big house no man waked but they. Mr. Johnson tarried for some reason or other.

'How well you read!' she remarked.

'You mean the Lessons? Oh, with unction, I hope. I like playing on the not over-acute nervous chords of my fellow parishioners. It's only a trick. You—you, as you stand there, a little, convinced materialist, I could engage to impress you and make you cry with one sentence. I will. One of the sentences from the opening of the church service. I often used to have to read them when I was consul at Acre.'

'*I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and against Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son.*'

He was a good actor, that was all. Amy had tears in her eyes. He saw them.

'There you are! What is that text to you that I can so move you with it? I like to stir people's emotions, I admit, especially the sluggish emotions of clods. The ineptitude of the clergy vexes me. Once a week a certain mediocre orator is handsomely given the ear of a fair number of persons who are bound by their conventions to listen to him, and he should try to give their emotionality a sort of Turkish bath and induce a picturesque exhibition of natural paganism. He ought to be ashamed to let a single farmer go to sleep during his tenancy in the pulpit. What he has got to do is to stimulate the latent poetry in people's natures. Religion, to many, is but a résumé of the sum of their poetical capacity, their only romantic outlet. The Bible is the country man's Maeterlinck, the Baudelaire of the old maid of the cathedral city.'

He went on talking, slowly and deliberately, without taking any notice of Amy. She lay back in her arm-chair and listened to him without sense of responsibility, seeing plainly enough that for this sententious egotist she was merely the reeds, the desert air on which he chose to fling his wild words.

'But as your clergyman here is by no means inspired, I wonder why you trouble to go every Sunday, feeling as you do?' she remarked idly.

'I want my poetical nature stimulated, and the simple church service does it for me. I enjoy going to church, and I like other people to enjoy it. My servants serve me better when they are churchgoers. The funny thing is that my wife, the only one of us who is truly, if unconsciously, religious, is the only one who grumbles at having to go. What are you looking at? Case G? It is only another binful of stimulants. By the way, I want a drink. Will you have one?'

'No, thanks,' said Amy. 'I don't think it is good drinking between meals.'

'Just the time. It is never good for you, but if you will take stimulants, don't weaken their effect by diluting them with food.'

'Nipping!' said Amy drily. 'You advocate that? I am against drinking in all its forms.'

'So am I. But as it's all poison, take it neat if you do take it, and get the maximum of effect with the smallest amount consumed. You don't want the effect, you say? Of course not. Why should you set up sclerosis and make connective tissue before your time?'

He put the case of spirits back without taking any, and as Mr. Johnson drifted in at that moment, Dand looked at Amy and a pouting, chiselled smile flitted over his heavy face.

'Johnson shan't have any, either!' said he. 'Johnson, we have got an Egeria—she will keep us all straight.'

Amy did not like the glance which Mr. Johnson dealt her from his pale, inefficient eyes.

CHAPTER IX

As Amy had expected, hoped, and not feared, the entire management of the Dand household drifted into her hands. She had guessed Mrs. Dand's idiosyncrasy correctly. The shadow, not the substance, of authority was all she cared about. If someone would silently do the work and allow her to assume the credit of it, she was well content, and loudly hailed the tact that procured her the maximum of importance with the minimum of trouble. Amy domineered as modestly as possible. She had compassed her desire; it was her nature to organize, to direct, and for the weal of others sooner than that of her own. Yet she was frightened sometimes, on reviewing her position, to find how all powerful she had become. Slowly, but surely, this posse of comfort-loving, incapable women had come to depend upon the slight, urgent girl for her judgment in every decision, for her influence in every concession that they wished to wring from the autocratic master of the house, who had once been a sad stumbling block in the way of feminine improvements, but whom Amy could manage as no woman had ever managed him before. It became a sort of game: 'See if you can get him to do it, Amy!' Or a bill was thrust into her hands to be adroitly placed before him at the right moment. Thus she practised on his mental laziness and dislike of trouble; she tempered his undeniable miserliness for them, while saving his money for him in other ways. She made him comfortable. He had never complained, but that was something quite new. Everybody felt the change. Servants ceased to find Swarland Hall too dull a place to live in;

the men left off grumbling, the maids refrained from making mischief. Amy did what she liked with them all. She actually took on herself to choose the new pair for Mrs. Dand's carriage, though horseflesh was hardly in her province. The proof of the horses was in the driving, however, and Mr. Hodges said they were all right. Soon an entirely efficient and affable staff filled the offices and stables, all except Annie Dawes, the cook—a survival of evil, uncared-for days, whom Amy had not as yet found an excuse for getting rid of. She meant to compass it, though, all in good time.

The daughter of the house, the only clever member of the group, could easily have held her own, had she cared to oppose the usurper. Dulce, however, took no interest in anything outside her own life that centred in her ridiculous little maid's room, full of dull Eastern brasses and grubby cretonne. It contained her library of rare and racy books, her various fetiches; the idol from Benin that smelt, the row of china pigs on the mantelpiece that Mr. Milliset had given her, the scratchy Whistlers and Beardsleys on the walls. The air of it was pervaded by a mingled smell of incense and cigarette and mongoose. For Dulce was one of those people who rejoice in the love of animals which they are too lazy or stupid to look after. Amy did it for her. She did everything for everybody. It behoved her to make friends.

For she had broken through her great rule: she had been foolish enough to attach herself to one member of this family, at least. To leave now would be a wrench—a considerable wrench. She loved Mrs. Dand's child, and was prepared to make any sacrifice of time, trouble, and consideration if she might be permitted to abide in the same house with the little girl. She had stolen a daughter's affections away from her mother; it was their guilty

secret, a secret of which the innocent child was, however, quite unaware. Amy had been thus far loyal. But she knew that it was a risky game that she was playing. In the even, calm-seeming backwater on which the girl's frail barque plied, she was sensible that her indefensible appropriation of another woman's property might stand for the dangerous weir in which her own fortunes might happen to go down and be engulfed some day.

Mrs. Dand did not love Erinna in any real sense of the word. She did not even care for her, but she was proud of her. The little girl represented a beautiful adjunct to her matronhood. 'My child!' Its affections belonged to her by divine right, and she expected to retain them, without, however, making any special effort to do so. Why, indeed, should a mother strive and manœuvre for nature's own indefeasible gift? Amy knew she must not filch it; she was forbidden by all the laws of propriety and expediency. But a child could not have too much kissing.

No one dreamed of her greedy, grasping, passionate love; no one was permitted to surprise her stolen kisses in lonely nurseries, her rapid embraces in dark angles of the corridors of this contorted, twisted old house, favourable enough to any sort of lovers' meetings. The child's own mother still ran, in nursery parlance, to catch it when it fell, only Amy always happened to be the one who first heard the screams that heralded such nursery disasters, and honourably made its pressing need of comfort known in the proper quarter. She knew this was right. A mother's place is beside her child with a bump on its forehead, or a thorn in its finger—Amy fully realized that unwritten law of motherhood. Edith must have all the privileges, while Amy took as many of the penalties of the state as she could.

No woman with a really guilty attachment to hide

ever worked as hard at its concealment and furtherance as did Amy over the comparatively innocent passion to which she had succumbed. Ridiculously enough, it was for glimpses of a white starched muslin frock that her eyes turned furtively to the doorway; it was for childish babble that she listened, and a baby's name that she breathed, like Parisina in her sleep, 'a name she dared not breathe by day.'

She scarcely gave a thought now to the other secret, held inviolably or otherwise by Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson and she were good friends. In whichever way he chose to spell her name, he could only pronounce it in one. There was not much danger; everything was so interlocked. Mr. Dand had left her in Paris, to all appearance under the questionable protection of Sir Mervyn Dymond; his verdict on that count was recorded in his invitation to her to form a permanent member of his household. Was he aware, furthermore, that she had spent three months in London with Sir Mervyn as his secretary? Had Mr. Johnson told him? Maybe? But at least he had not warned the ladies; their loving attitude towards her testified to that omission. She wondered if Mr. Dand had thought fit to tell his new wife that Amy had been in the service of the last? That fact there would be no harm in ascertaining from his daughter.

'No, Edith doesn't know, and father and I don't care to enlighten her. She would tell the old ladies at once, and that would be fatal. Do you know why we have them to live with us?'

'Kindness, perhaps.'

'No, not that. They are a source of income. Shall I tell you what they pay each?'

'No, don't,' replied Amy, conventionally, for, as a matter of fact, she always wanted to know everything.

'I could tell you, but even Edith doesn't know. Father and I have long since seen the wisdom of keeping our sweet show-wife in blissful ignorance concerning the things that matter. You see, she is a child that has never grown up. She's a case of arrested development. Vanity is her motive power, and it's her very vanity that saves her. Dad manages the house, at least, he did till you came, and if Edith dreamed for a moment of her own incompetence she'd have a fit. She's nothing, she knows nothing, she can manage nothing, and yet she thinks she holds the reins. Why, she can't even give you a decent cup of tea; it's sure to be cold as ice or bitter as wormwood. Bless her! she sees herself as a fair and saving presence—as the gracious chatelaine!'

'Oh, Dulce, how you do speak of the poor thing! Your father chose her after all!'

'Oh, father would always have to be married. When my mother died he just had to have someone to fill her place. It was too good a berth to remain unfilled. I'm not ornamental enough to sit at the head of a table. Here is a fine old house and place. It must have a proper mistress, and she must have a pretty neck to show his jewels off. Do you know, she doesn't even keep them herself. They aren't hers. He hands them out to her—those he thinks suitable for her to wear, and she gives them back to him at night.'

'To take care of, of course.'

'No, because he likes to keep her meek and unpropertied, just another gem, and a poor one at that. Dull people are like inferior stones, not properly facetted—they can neither reflect nor give back light.'

'Say solid merit, cut *en cabochon,* because it's such a pity to lose any of it!'

'You needn't stand up for Edith! She can stand up

for herself. She has a greasy way of getting what she wants that I hate. When she thinks some of us are not behaving as we ought, she goes up to bed and has a temperature. She can send the thermometer up two or three degrees in her mouth, just as a child can.'

A horn was sounded, and the swish of a motor up the drive near where the two girls were sitting.

'Dad,' said Dulce. 'Who has he got with him?'

'A young man,' said Amy drily.

'He will probably be here for dinner, or even stay the night.'

'Then do please to fasten your dress properly. You hardly ever do, and I can tell by this young man's back that he is of the sort that likes tidiness and is deeply pained by the sight of a button undone or a string untied.'

'Not my sort then.'

'No, your sort carries *papier poudrée* in its pocket and kneels at ladies' knees in ballrooms, so that everyone tumbles over his feet.'

'You mean the Baby!' said Dulce complacently. 'Yes, he wrote to me yesterday on brown paper with a packer's pen. Dad disapproves of Milliset. That is why I encourage him.'

'Dad is right to let you sow your garden oats in peace,' replied Amy serenely. 'Let us go in to tea and be introduced to the man, and then I'll hear if I am to get a room ready.'

Mrs. Dand was already in her place in front of an elaborate installation of the social meal, about which everything was *cap à pie* except the commodity itself. In some houses the tea is never made and the clocks never go.

'Mr. Dyconson—my daughter—Miss Stephens,' pronounced the master of the house. 'Have you any tea, Edith? Weak, please.'

'You'll *get* it weak, father,' said Dulce spitefully, and Mrs. Dand smiled sweetly. She was no fool, even though her silver kettle did not, could not boil.

Amy glanced at Mr. Dyconson. From the way Mr. Dand pronounced his name she could see that Mr. Dand did not think much of him. He was tall, slight, and correct in a sportsmanlike way. He looked stupid, but desirous of playing his part fairly in the social circle. He would say as much as was necessary, and no more. He was conceited, but morbidly anxious to do everything like everybody else. Even his shyness was perfunctory, and though fostered by his vanity, was merely the result of paucity of ideas. Amy observed that Dulce, trying hard to make him talk, was on the wrong tack, while excessively anxious, for some reason or other, to be on the right one.

Mr. Dand, sprawling on his long, low chair, consuming tea-cakes and weak tea, was an ungainly object. His thanks for each cup as his wife handed it to him were inaudible. He was very tired, and yet his magnificent large discourtesy contrasted rather favourably with the mere gawkish taciturnity of the young guest, whose nose grew redder and redder as Dulce bored and bored him.

When the meal was over, the master of the house carried the guest off to the library, and the women were left alone. It had been ascertained that the young man was going to stay the night.

'He is the new partner, I expect,' remarked Mrs. Bowman. 'Amy, do come and pick up this stitch for me.'

'Don't you see he is a sportsman?' said Lady Meadrow. 'And there was poor dear Dulce trying to recommend herself to him by talking to him about books!'

'I wasn't trying to recommend myself to him, Granny. I was only being civil to one of Dad's guests,' retorted the girl indignantly, flushing an unlovely brick red.

'He has a fine figure,' said Lady Meadrow. 'I daresay Dulce and I will take to pulling caps about him before long.'

'As you neither of you wear caps,' Mrs. Bowman remarked, 'you will have to fall back on your hair, and I don't know which of you can afford best to lose at that game.'

Neither Lady Meadrow's wig nor Dulce's scanty yellow 'bun' looked as if they could have withstood a prolonged siege. This was to be set down as one of Mrs. Bowman's nasty speeches. Lady Meadrow never made nasty speeches, she was a man's woman. 'Many men have loved me, and I have not always loved them, but I have been able to keep them as friends. . . . I have always thought there was something in me of Aspasia and Mary Stuart both? . . . When I *do* wear caps, I shall adopt the Mary Stuart shape.' . . .

The lambent smile with which her inflexible critic and co-mother-in-law always welcomed any allusion to Lady Meadrow's aptness for the questionable rôles of history duly appeared on Mrs. Bowman's face.

'Isabella Meadrow always talks of life as if it were one long, under-dressed, fancy ball,' she remarked in a loud whisper to Amy. 'One part she don't seem to care for—and that's the part of wife and mother! And she ain't wise enough for Aspasia. The dear Dean had a great respect for Aspasia.'

Amy generally listened attentively when great adventuresses were mentioned. But the weight of the opinion of the late Dean of Blois on the character of Aspasia was lost on her, for she felt bound to follow Dulce out

of the room. The girl had fled, with that look on her face which calls woman to woman.

Amy found her in the far-off stableyard with her face buried in her big Newfoundland's neck. The irony of it was that the dog did not like her. Animals hated Dulce. She looked up as Amy approached, and rose shamefacedly, with bits of straw clinging to her knees.

'Come in and dress,' said Amy. 'What frock are you going to put on to-night, may I ask?'

'My old blue!'

'Pity, isn't it?'

'Why? I want it worn out!'

'It's wasting a chance,' said Amy, but she interfered no more.

Dulce did wear her ugliest and most unbecoming dress, with a dogged persistency of self-sacrifice, by which Amy realized the depth of her feelings. It betokened an unloosening of moral moorings, a complete transference of old ideals, combined with savage vexation over her physical insufficiency to realise the new ones. She was too angry, too puzzled to make any attempts at amelioration of the conditions attending her first real love affair. She was anxious to attract Dyconson; she was over head and ears in love with him, but no bedizenments, no feathers or beads for her! Dulce was a very odd squaw, indeed. Luckily she was an heiress and had plenty of money. For once Providence had been fair in her apportioning of blessings. Amy did not condemn Providence in this case. Beauty or money on one side of the balance, and a husband on the other. It was as it should be.

CHAPTER X

'DADDY,' said the little Erinna, raising her voice and glancing slavishly at her half-sister. 'When can we go to the Purple Fields?'

Amy knew perfectly well that Dulce was setting the scene for Dyconson's proposal, and using the innocent child as prompter. Mr. Dyconson was present, but his fascinating imperturbability was proof against the vast amount of wasted magnetism that was flying about the breakfast table that morning.

'Very well, I'll go,' Mr. Dand agreed, 'but it must be on a Saturday, of course, and Edith must promise to give us enough to eat. Last time——!'

'Cook forgot exactly half the sandwiches,' said Mrs. Dand hastily.

'Amy must see to it. . . . Yes, we will show Dyconson what Erinna calls the Purple Fields, vulgarly known as Stobs Moor. It's a mass of heather, and it's out now.'

'Shall we ask the Judds, or will it bore you, Jeremy?'

'Oh, ask everyone. No one person bores me more than another.'

'Everyone bores you except Mr. Johnson,' said his wife pettishly.

'And I know Johnson so well that he has bored and bored till he has bored out at the other end.'

'You are so dreadfully fastidious, Jeremy,' she said, lovingly.

'I dislike that word applied to anything but personal cleanliness.'

'Daddy has two baths a day sometimes,' piped the child.

'I see you, Rémy, going down to the bath from my window in the mornings,' said Lady Meadrow, 'you and Mr. Dyconson. How do you appreciate bathing on blue tiles sunk in the ground, like an ancient Roman, Mr. Dyconson?'

'I like it.'

'I can't say I do,' said his host; 'it is cold sometimes.'

'Then why do you do it, Daddy?' asked the child.

'Because I am an Englishman,'

'Then you ought to shoot, too?' remarked Dulce, 'to be consistent.'

'As if Englishmen were ever consistent! I don't see why I should shoot, if I dislike it. I employ an official to hang my criminals for me, and I get a friend, Dyconson here, to shoot my pheasants. The Oldfort tradesmen have to be supplied, but I have no taste for doing my own dirty work.'

The ill-sounding phrase drew a slight wave of expression over the pink face of the young man, but the surface was soon clear and blank again, and he sat regarding his host as he might some animal, both strange and weird, but yet a gentleman and a member of his order. Amy watched him with intense interest; she did not care to lose one of the occasional ripples of thought that passed over the placid mere of his face, that poor Dulce loved.

'But you do fish, father, and that's cruel?' said Dulce.

'Possibly. But as I told you, my inconsistency does not trouble me at all, thank you! Now I am off to the library. By the way, Edith, don't, as you say, omit to ask the Vicarage people on Saturday. It will amuse them, and I will have Johnson over to amuse me. He will look

so delightfully awkward sitting on a heather bump, like a yellow calceolaria!'

Amy thought him a strange mixture of brutality and kindness, as she followed Dulce into the library, where Dulce had followed Dyconson with her strange dull concentrated air. Amy helped to cover this unwise proceeding, since she could not prevent it. With her unbiassed eyes she saw plainly that Mr. Dyconson, whether he meant to take Dulce and her money or not, had no immediate desire for her company. He was not used to women in the smoking-room, he even preferred them, in the deep depth of his subconsciousness, not to smoke. And Dulce did not smoke prettily, and it darkened her teeth, not good at the best of times. Amy at that moment arranged a proverb for her. 'Heiresses should neither be seen nor heard, *before* marriage!'

'What *is* this Johnson?' Mr. Dyconson asked languidly.

'He is an author, and a Socialist, and my secretary.'

'I can't stand Socialists,' Dyconson protested. 'They don't wash.'

'That's the old-fashioned sort of Socialist, the modern sort is as clean as you or I, only it chooses to work out its salvation in flannel, instead of starched linen.'

'A Socialist can't make himself into a gentleman if he tries.'

'He doesn't want to. He knows there are better dreams going than your obsolete feudal one, and that other virtues besides good form are to be allowed to have a look in.'

'I am a Socialist,' said Amy hardily, and her unnecessary self assertion was punished by a stony glare from Mr. Dyconson, as who should say, 'Of course you are, how could a little governess be anything else? You have all to gain——"'

Mr. Dand went on; Amy knew that he was amusing him-

self. 'It is really a very curious and beautiful thing, this mysterious quality we have agreed to call good form, breeding, style, what you will—the formula of commendation varies. It reminds me, speaking archæologically, of the patena that antiquaries find on certain flint implements that have been buried in the soil for thousands of years. Their surface is subtly altered, there comes a sort of beautiful outside wash or veneer——'

'I beg your pardon,' remarked Mr. Dyconson, 'I should have said that in *our* case it was no wash or veneer, but something that went through and through.'

'That's right, Dyconson, stand up for our poor old much abused order. We will say, then, that this precious essence wells up, from the very centre of the aristocratic being, exudes through all the willing pores and forms a glaze. Any way it's there. But it doesn't count any more. It will have to go, considered as an asset. Picturesque but useless. I'm sorry, Miss Stephens, to hear you are one of those tiresome people who are trying to get us all back to the land in our own despite. I am not speaking of those that are already there, unhappy landowners like me, they of course will have to turn out, to make room for the city spadeholders.'

'Oh, *me!*' said Amy, 'That isn't a part of the programme *I* am keen on. Very few people are good at digging, nowadays. And—' she laughed, 'I maintain that a woman without a maid goes back to the land every time she brushes her own skirt. All we women who labour in the sweat of our brows pay toll to the earth, and even the rich ones get into direct conflict with nature every time they go out on a cold day and wrestle with an expensive veil that won't keep tied, or a warm coat that won't keep shut. We can't escape, and I for one don't want to. It hardens us.'

'Yes, and your complexions, too,' said Mr. Dand brutally, looking at his daughter. 'A woman's complexion is her true battle ground. Fight with nature there and win.'

'Jeremy is right,' said Mrs. Dand, passing waxen pink fingers, tipped with shining almonds, over a clear soft cheek. 'Dulce, take your father's hint.'

Though Amy's cheek was not rough, she did not, could not keep her hands well. They were clean, that was all.

CHAPTER XI

Mrs. Dand was roused in the middle of that night, by the sound of her husband stirring in the next room. It was a prolonged agitation and ended by agitating her. She rose and opened the door between them; Mr. Dand had tacitly promised that that door should never be fastened against her. Moreover, for her own satisfaction, she had had the lock removed from it.

'Jeremy! You are fully dressed!'

'Look at that!'

He took her soft hand and led her to the window. The sticky wreaths of mist, like rolls of cotton wool, lay about the hollows of a small paddock, outside the garden railings. Through its perplexities dim shapes were distinguishable, moved by some sort of indeterminate struggle, figures whose greatest length was horizontal, except for one perpendicular gray line. . . .

'Is that Amy? And crying out? Oh, dear!'

'It's the donkey that is crying out. The horses are bullying him. I must go and help her. Dress and come down and chaperon us!'

By the time he reached her side, Amy was leading the bruised and bleeding donkey out of the field. She was indeed scantily clad in her haste to go to the rescue.

'He's bleeding, poor Billy! They had hurt him awfully. Did you hear the poor little thing cry out? That careless beast of a groom——?'

'I'll find out to-morrow and dismiss him. He'll say the donkey began it, of course.'

They stowed the suffering animal in a place of safety

and attended to his wounds. Amy would help, though her teeth were chattering.

'Now come in and I will make you something hot. Edith will be down in a minute.'

'I had much better go to bed, hadn't I?'

He did not answer, but seizing his wife's thick fur cloak as it hung on a stand in the hall, made as if to throw it round her.

'Oh, no, not that. She'd have a fit!'

Quietly substituting his own fur motor coat, he masterfully led her into the library, and set about lighting a spirit lamp and boiling water.

'I don't want any. I really should like to go——'

'Don't disappoint Edith of her midnight teaparty. She is determined to come down and chaperon you.'

'Suppose Lady Meadrow and Mrs. Bowman should take it into their heads to join us, too?' said Amy laughing, and resigning herself.

'It depends on the beauty of their night gear. Edith has got a new peignoir and longs to wear it. It was made for midnight alarms and excursions like this, but unfornately, they are few and far between. You have procured this one with the help of poor Billy. Drink!'

'I think we ought to wait till Mrs. Dand comes.'

'Yes, if your teeth would wait, too, and leave off chattering. Besides, you can do as you like in this family and you know it.'

'I don't know it. I always think of the last time in Paris.'

'Ah, but that was the other wife,' he said bluntly.

'Does this one know about it?' said Amy earnestly, preoccupied with the subject that was a standing puzzle to her ever since her entry into the Dand menage, and which she hoped she was now on the point of solving.

'No. I personally hardly remembered you, but what I remembered I liked, so when my daughter wanted to have you with her, I took you back without demur.'

'Very good of you, I am sure,' said Amy stiffly, from the depth of his coat.

'Yes, I asked for no explanations——'

'I could have given them. . . .'

'I didn't want them. I consider that women have a perfect right to make their own lives, as we do.'

'But——'

'I see that you are dying to convince me that it was this way, and not that, that you were not so-and-so, but thus. You don't like me to think you a bad lot, eh? My dear child, I do not go in for minding other people's business, or keeping tabs on their actions. I should as soon expect you to enquire into my character at Oldfort as an employer of labour!'

'You don't realize that one cares to justify oneself,' said Amy sadly, 'and put things on a proper footing. It is so insulting!'

'No, no, there now! Insulting is an absurd word between you and me. I understand well enough. You want to give me a correct image of you, to give me data for respect. I respect you quite enough. Don't do it! I am an old cantankerous fellow and perhaps my own view of you, which you will kindly let alone for the future, is more pleasing than even the one you would like to evoke. Leave me in my error, if error it be. Good Heavens, if I were a suitor for your hand, like Dyconson for my daughter's, the image must needs be precise, a man must know all about the woman he is going to trust with his honour.'

He sneered. Amy shivered.

'That fragile imaginary commodity we all pretend to set such store by, and which is only our sexual vanity

under another name. No, no, the glamour of a *cause cèlébre* is over you—don't disturb it, it is very becoming. Lady Meadrow subsists on it. She speaks regretfully enough of the time when all Europe was ringing with her name——'

Amy had not time to answer before Edith Dand came in, clad in the vaporous frou-frou of a Parisian creation, that she had lately bought, and as her husband said, had longed for an opportunity of wearing.

'Well, you two look very comfortable! I heard you pow-wowing all the way upstairs. What was it all about?'

'The value of a scandal.'

'The cost of one, do you mean?'

'One might easily know both,' said Amy bitterly. 'I wonder if those are prophetic words?'

'I think it means that you are sleepy, Amy,' said Edith kindly. 'You look like an owl in an ivy bush. Do you know your hair is all come down?'

'I never knew it was up,' said the girl, 'I dressed in such a hurry——'

'Yes, to save poor Billy. But I think it would have been wiser to have come and knocked at Jeremy's door, or better still, mine, and then gone quietly back to bed. How much have you got on under that motor wrap of Jeremy's?'

'Nothing much,' said Amy, humbly.

'Well, hadn't you better give Jeremy back his coat and let me take you upstairs?'

'Yes, please spread those beautiful chiffon wings round me,' said Amy, 'and then modesty will be saved. He hadn't time to look at me before, we were so agitated about Billy, but now, the consequences might be serious.'

'Keep the thing on until you get upstairs,' said Dand, gruffly.

'She can't walk in it, really, Jeremy,' said Edith with serious obstinacy. 'Leave us to manage. Good-night.'

With charming solicitude she wound a few yards of sleeve round the attenuated figure of Amy, and the two women departed.

'I shan't see either of you at breakfast,' he called after them. 'I shall go to the office early, it isn't worth while to go to bed again!'

'Strange man, my husband, isn't he?' said Mrs. Dand, pausing on the stairs.

Amy said gravely, 'I have seen so many queer people in my time.'

'Oh, yes, Bohemians. But not so many other singular country gentlemen, I should think?' Edith said, proudly. 'Dand is one of the oldest names in England. It used to be Daund.'

'Saxon, I should think—being one syllable,' said Amy. 'And is that the reason Mr. Dickinson thinks it worth while to alter his name?'

'Dyconson—Dyconson . . .' murmured Edith pensively. 'Here, throw this old gown over you and put me to bed again. Let's talk. Does Dulce care for Mr. Dyconson so much, do you think?'

'Quite enough to marry him on,' replied Amy, politely turning down the quilt a little more. It was a gorgeous quilt, Mrs. Dand's whole room was like a temple of some meaner heathen goddess. Presently the goddess herself got into bed, prettily—no vulgar gymnastics with the last leg. 'Love,' she said, as she lay down, 'is the only thing that makes marriage possible.'

'It often makes it impossible,' said Amy switching off the lights one by one. 'At the best it is like olives, an acquired taste, and very bitter. Most people manage very well without olives at their table. They don't miss them.

The heart doesn't feel what the eye doesn't see! . . . I am so sleepy—I am talking nonsense. But truly, I often think of the impertinence of it, every little petty soul of them all imagining itself capable of the grandest, rarest passion in the whole world! I think it cheek. And I can't for the life of me see why two plain ordinary people like Dulce and Mr. Dyeonson couldn't fix it up without dragging in that poor much-abused boy with the quiver at all. There are such lots of things that make marriage palatable. Other goddesses might be given a turn of presiding over the business, I think, and give Venus a rest!'

'I can forgive Love without Marriage,' said Mrs. Dand slowly. 'You know I can, Amy, you were told about Dawes, weren't you, and the horrid trouble she got herself into just before you came here? I was good to her, don't you think, and broadminded? Her people thanked me for saving her from worse. And I am so glad now to think I was able to put prejudice aside and welcome her back without shuddering, for I personally always feel that sort of person to be for evermore unclean. The only way I could get over it was thinking that at least, though she sinned much, it was through passion——'

'If you call that passion!' said Amy contemptuously, 'I should call it by quite another name. Still, it was nice of you, very, to take Annie Dawes back and not give her away to the other servants, as some women would, while being kind. . . . But to go back to our discussion. . . . You have proved your tolerance of Love without Marriage, why not extend it to Marriage without Love —so much less reprehensible?'

'You are preaching just like a platform orator, dear,' remarked Mrs. Dand, discovering a belated hairpin left in her hair under the smart muslin night cap, and throwing it on to the dressing table where it fell with a metallic tinkle.

'Well, good-night. . . . I am tired of talking and I shall go to sleep, I am sure. . . . By-bye! Love is enough, and so you will find. . . .'

Amy Stephens shook her head, and crept back to her cold bed, that she would have to leave again in a few hours, for she rose early. She did not prize Mrs. Dand's ignorant, innocent statistics with regard to a passion which she was as far from having capacity to feel as Amy herself.

'Pretty silly thing!' she thought to herself, 'she never had a chance to feel or think, and then her marriage came along and shelved all that sort of thing forever, while poor plain Dulce has got to go through the whole scale of emotion from top to bottom, with the chromatics thrown in!'

For Dulce, all the house knew, was dying of love for the simple young sportsman her father had brought home only a few days ago, and at the picnic to-morrow, it was hoped that the business would get itself settled, and Dulce would cease to rave in her sleep, to put on her clothes wrong side out, to slap Erinna wherever she was so minded, in short to resume the even tenor of her morbid days, and begin to prepare her trousseau.

CHAPTER XII

The tinkle of the glasses, the rattle of the picnic tin plates, sounded crisp across the heather. The Dand party were disposed on bossy clumps, sitting in uncomfortable attitudes as if on so many wire mattresses; it is surprising how few Englishwomen are able to sit down prettily al fresco! Lady Meadrow, who had practised Jiu-jitsu quite recently, was yet no hand at graceful reclining. Mrs. Bowman was obviously made for thrones and daïs only, while the simple Mrs. Judd looked like a feathered hen sitting on her chickens. Edith Dand's fête-champêtre costume would not have disgraced a member of the front row of the Gaiety chorus, and Dulce wore a boa made of cock's feathers, dyed pink.

The inchoate, and to a social extent, restrained sneer with which Jeremy Dand regarded his daughter, angered Amy. Dulce was in truth ridiculous, but pathetic as well. Amy supposed that a father could not be expected to see the pathos of this single-handed love chase, this onslaught of all the emotional capabilities in a woman's nature pitted against a cold centre in a man's. Amy accused Mr. Dand of want of sympathy, want of imagination, though indeed his æsthetic leanings might as well have been pandered to in the matter of the boa; Amy wondered if by skilful manœuvring she could get it isolated from the brick-dust coloured cheek? But Dulce, though intent on fulfilling her woman's destiny, was obstinately averse to the adoption of woman's wiles—it was a good thing she had money! Amy knew Dyconson meant to secure it, and according to Amy's own theories, Dulce and Dyconson might have many

happy years of mutual accommodation yet. All would be well, the pink boa was a mere detail, and the father's frowns entirely a work of supererogation.

After the meal, the party broke up for a while. Amy followed Dulce, who chose to wander apart from an uncongenial party of matrons who were probably discussing her. The excited girl sat down on a low stone amid the heather, her head in her hands, stooping forward, gloomily. Her attitude disclosed a wedge-shaped slice of white material between her bodice and her skirt. Her untidy hair was full of dried bits of heather. And yet she hoped that Dyconson, when he had finished his cigar, would come to her, amorously.

Strange short-sightedness of the eager heart! She looked a deplorable, unenticing object. Amy could even make out the ridge of her backbone as she sat there. Yes, but Dulce was a woman after all, and incurred the same pangs that a fairer woman would have suffered. She was going to get her man; her money would do it for her, but Amy, the penniless, the idly seductive, to whom lovers fell, carelessly, easily, without her needing to lift so much as a finger to gain them, although she was not even pretty, felt that overpowering sense of pity for the sexually undowered of which a generous nature is capable.

She now completely realized the sensations with which Mr. Dand was regarding Dulce a short while ago—a sensation of unavoidable disgust, even horror, that Love should have chosen to take up his abode in so graceless, so unprepossessing a temple! How important were looks! Dulce was clever, a fine character, in some ways, and would probably make an excellent wife and mother. But to hear this young creature, so utterly reft of charm, indulging in the expression of even the mere commonplaces of passion, made Amy feel as if the sweet cold yellow of the evening sky

was stained and smirched by the grotesque drama of inartistic emotion that was being played out under it.

But it must be carried forward. Dulce was capable of falling ill if the last act of the play failed of being enacted. And she was luckily pacified. Mr. Dyconson, at last, drawn by the conscious and unconscious magnetism of two women both working in the same cause, approached, and Dulce, her eagerness ill-masked by a ponderous lightness, proposed a walk. Dyconson, Amy knew, was only forestalled in this request. What a bad tactician poor Dulce was, to allow herself to be thus unnecessarily beforehand with him! Her marked man followed her with perfunctory decision and eagerness. Amy went back to the others.

Horrible! They all knew what was toward and awaited the event with more or less suppressed excitement, according to the decency that was in them. Presently Lady Meadrow, self-elected as competent high priestess of the Courts of Love, sighed and constituted herself spokeswoman of the subject that was occupying them all.

'What is Love?' she said, toying with the fringes of her scarf. Mr. and Mrs. Judd waited placably for the discussion to begin; one always did hear some queer talk at the Dands', but none of that family ever meant any real harm by their plain speaking, and as for the theories they reputedly held, their practice sufficiently exonerated them. Lady Meadrow was a wonderfully well preserved woman who had gone through a great deal, and had a title. Mrs. Bowman, the impressive, the well born, was the relict of two distinguished clerics. Mr. Dand was an esteemed and important man in the county, a J. P. and a churchwarden and so on. Still Mr. and Mrs. Judd, silently appreciative, refrained from taking any part in these discussions. They thought it best.

Miss Stephens was always ready for the battle of words.

'*What is Love? 'Tis not hereafter*—any way?'

'"*O, Love, Love, Love! O withering might!*"' Mr. Dand capped her. Mrs. Judd thought he was quoting Milton, he spoke with such sonority and dignity.

Edith Dand set her right. She was pleased to show that she recognized the quotation. 'I always think Tennyson put it *rather* too strong!' she remarked, shivering affectedly.

'The repetition is most indelicate,' observed Mrs. Bowman.

'No one here has any right to have an opinion on the constitution of Love,' Mr. Dand said, 'except Johnson, because he's an author!'

'I beg your pardon, Rémy,' cried Lady Meadrow. 'Every man, or woman either, who has lived his or her life——'

'Ah, yes, indeed. There are three qualities,' said Mr. Dand, 'which are taken to be his inalienable birthright by every Englishman, and Englishwoman. A sense of humour—an eye for colour—and Poupée claims the third.'

'I cannot help considering, Rémy, that to take the world as I have taken it, with both hands, warming both hands at the fire of life, has been for me a liberal education in the mighty master passion, and I wouldn't have missed it for anything.'

'The faculty, even of loving, as I understand it,' said Amy, falling suddenly into the conversation, urged by her zeal for argument, 'is so rare that it needn't really enter into people's calculation at all!'

Everybody, including the kind placable Judds, turned and gave her ear. Mr. Johnson, really interested, murmured 'Explain!' There was, or Amy thought there was, a touch of malevolence about his request that spurred her to try to give him an answer.

'Something so uncommon and unaccountable that it might simply be a wrong ingredient, that now and then, had got by mistake into the usual recipe for unions, a drug which no one can identify or renew at will, like that drug, you know, in Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde! A good half of the world doesn't feel Love and needn't feel it, for all practical purposes, that I can see!'

'Then, Miss Stephens, I take it, you approve of people entering into the sacred bonds of matrimony without strong feeling on either side?' propounded Mr. Judd solemnly.

'Yes, on *either* side. Of course if there is strong feeling on one side and not on the other, there's the mischief.'

'If I might contribute any enlightenment to the discussion,' said Mrs. Bowman, 'I would tell you that mine were love matches.'

'On both sides I am sure,' said Mr. Judd. 'The necessary ingredient was there that time, don't you think, Miss Stephens?'

'Oh, of course it sometimes gets in,' said Amy shortly. 'And very nice it must be for both parties, in that case. But lots of things are called Love that aren't!'

'I agree with Miss Stephens,' put in the novelist, assuming suddenly a professional air. 'A very young unmarried girl, as often as not, does not in the least translate the sense of her desires and often mistakes a purely physical sentiment that should have it's immediate gratification and no more said about it, for that mysterious mixture of feelings that constitute a real affinity.'

'Now you have done it, Johnson,' said Mr. Dand. 'You are getting too deep for the ladies.'

'Not at all!' exclaimed Lady Meadrow. 'I, at least, am in my element. It all depends, Mr. Johnson, what you mean by affinity? One is conscious of so many potential

affinities, that never bore their earthly fruit! So many ships that have passed in the night—the touch of a hand—the glance of an eye that speaks clearly to those who will read, and yet is too often neglected and passed over——'

'I think affinity,' said Amy seriously, 'when you get it stripped of poetical fringes and so on, simply means the power we have or conceive we have, of passing the better part of our days beside a person with the least amount of friction, or chafing at the absurd bond that Society exacts——'

'Amy, you mustn't decry marriage!' said Mrs. Dand with a glance at the only slightly ruffled countenance of the clergyman. Mr. Judd in point of fact liked Amy, and her secular ministrations, which extended to the outside limits of his parish, were most useful. He meant to undertake her morals as soon as he had got through with the Harvest Festival.

The pale girl went on eagerly, as if she were addressing her old 'Betterment' Society. 'No, of course I don't decry marriage at all for those who like it. All I object to is people considering that particular glorious shibboleth called love indispensable to happiness in marriage, and I am disgusted at the way the world hounds down those sensible couples who decide to enter into an alliance for other reasons that seem to me just as potent—for an establishment of community of interests, for children, for ambition, and what not. Why should it at once be thought necessary to bring in the sacred word love to justify the step they have taken? And the pair are always quite ready to deceive themselves, to please the general sense of those around them. Most women agree to mean by falling in love that they have found a man whom they can bear to kiss them, as well as pay their bills. Most men mean that they have found a woman who will not be likely to hate

being kissed after being kept in frocks and frills and beef for a year!'

'Well, we are all friends here,' said Mrs. Bowman coldly, meaning that Amy had been allowing her tongue to run away with her.

'Have you ever spoken in public, Amy?' asked Mrs. Dand, feeling herself very broadminded and modern.

'Yes, lots!' said Amy, whose cheeks were as red as fire with an unexpected access of shyness. She jumped up. 'I am going to see about the tea,' she said. 'I will go and fill the kettle—it will probably take a good hour to boil.'

'I wonder which of them will boil first?' observed Mrs. Bowman, and there was no need for her to particularize the objects of her indecent surmise.

'I'll show you the way to the well,' Mr. Dand said, with the effect of a bountiful full stop.

. . . . .

He escorted Amy along the hollow dried-up water-course that was the only path over the moor, away from the chuckling, inharmonious, silly party. Amy felt at once clean, dignified, saved. All the heather-scented breath of the waste rushed into her lungs and she walked on buoyantly, carrying the kettle that was to be filled. Mr. Dand omitted to relieve her of it. He was apt to forget the little attentions which are usually the first care of the timorous, doubtfully-bred. Amy was a woman who preferred to pick up her own handkerchief, and hated having a door opened for her. She liked Mr. Dand the better for his magnificent negligence.

'I'm dreadful!' she said sighing confidentially.

'You are a theorist, that's all. And theorists always come to grief.'

'But I mean, I ought not to have spoken like that, among you all, mere strangers. Really, I could have said

it far easier to my class of working men in the East End. I have shocked these, oh, why did I? Your mother especially, and I like her best.'

'Did you know my mother has had two husbands?'

'Yes, the Dean of Blois and the Master of St. Frithiof.'

'Well, when she was asked once by an impertinent intimate friend which of her two mates she loved best, she declined to answer the question, but intimated for their guidance, that she meant to be buried in the grave with the Dean—my father.'

'How funny!' said Amy, her serenity restored, 'that in this censorious world, one woman should have a perfect right to go and lie down at the side of either of two different men she chooses.'

'That's one way of looking at it. At all events, I was telling you that little story to show you that she has no particular right to be shocked. And you know Lady Meadrow's history? And as for Judd, good soul, he means to take you in hand himself shortly, so for the present he allows you to run on.'

'And Mr. Johnson?'

'Johnson's contribution to the discussion was not very select. I reproved him. But he is a clever fellow, and he forgot we weren't all psychologists.'

'What has Mr. Johnson written?'

'Mostly morbid books, one healthy one, a shocker. It is just out, *"The Image of that Horror."*'

'Good name.'

'We wrote it together. I published it for him. The horror's mine. Johnson supplied the love scenes. I can't do love scenes. I have paid him four hundred pounds down for it and all further profit is for me.'

'How abject of Johnson! But I never liked him.'

'I did not know that you had ever seen him before,' Mr.

Dand remarked, carelessly. He did not wait for a confirmatory reply, and Amy thought she had a right to gather from his indifference that Mr. Johnson had refrained from discussing her—as yet, at any rate. . . . She became thoughtful. . . .

'Now,' said Mr. Dand, 'this is the turning. The track breaks away here, or should do. It is a very bad bit of road—loose stones that roll under your feet and are apt to throw you down. Yes, this is it.'

'Give me a hand,' said Amy.

He held his out, and she then refused it as brusquely as she had demanded it, saying, with a happy laugh, 'I can get on better by myself. Though you might perhaps take the kettle?'

He complied, without apology.

'What are you thinking of?' Amy lightly asked.

'You.'

You. . . . This, the sweetest word in a woman's ear, pronounced by the man she loves or is about to love, came to Amy combined with another of one of the sounds of her predilection—the sound of water flowing. Liquid notes, as the brown water hobbled over gravel beds, filtered through crevices, leapt over the larger stones in its haste to reach the quiet pool gratified her with a sudden sensation like that of a sweet odour to the nostrils. Mr. Dand was stooping over its still disc in the act of accomplishing the commonplace mission on which they had come. *You!* That little word had all the force and impressiveness of an unsought oracle. His back was turned towards her. For one little moment a wild sense of possible approximation filled her, a well of unrevealed intimacy revealed itself to her, as the full vowel-sounds from his lips reached her by way of the sounding-board of the water's surface. Then it was all over, the fountain was suddenly sealed again,

romance died down. All she saw and all her senses took in was the picture and the scant significance of the figure of a man of more than common bulk filling a copper kettle from the deep wholesome spring water.

He said nothing as they turned round and wheeled into line together for the walk back home. He seemed to have nothing to say. Amy in all her varied experience, had never come across any one who was less of a flirt.

Yet she dimly felt that passion, not sentiment, might be betrayed, some day, by the dull inexpressive eyes of this 'quiet' man. There was cruel sexual caprice in the pout of the upper lip, and self-will in the determined wave of the short hair over the reflective brow. Suppose that cameo-like stillness broken up by strong emotion, a woman might love him, but a woman would suffer.

CHAPTER XIII

THE meal was dreary. Everyone was worried as to the result of Dulce's walk, for it was impossible to tell from her face whether anything had happened or no. The expression of unnatural excitement with which she had started could hardly have been augmented and was constant all through the meal. Then crockery was packed up, tea leaves emptied on the heather and the question of home going began to occupy the minds of the party.

'Mr. Dyconson wants to drive you, Amy,' said Mr. Dand coming up to the girl. 'What will you do? Accept his offer, or go in the carriage with Edith and the old ladies?'

'It seems unnatural——' began Amy. She stopped suddenly, even with Mr. Dand she did not quite like to take the engagement of Dulce and Dyconson coarsely into account. 'Well, I suppose I had better go with him, if he asks me. I shall be bored to death. But please say I will.'

She imagined that the young man had settled it with Dulce, and now wished to pour confidences into the willing ear of Dulce's companion. 'Shy men are apt to choose the person who has been about their lady-love for this purpose,' she reflected. 'It is rather a mean way of beginning at the thin end of the family wedge!'

She passed along to the side of the road where Dyconson's little motor, which he had sent for from Oldfort the other day when the picnic was first talked of, was standing. He was already installed and imperturbably gave her his hand to steady her and help her up. Mr. Dand tucked a rug all round her body with scientific precision, and they started.

'Aren't we going to go any faster than this?' asked Amy presently; speed was to constitute her only pleasure in this journey.

'There's no hurry, is there?' the young man asked; 'one can't talk going at top speed.'

'Something new,' thought Amy, 'for him to want to talk! I suppose being engaged has loosened his tongue?"

She amiably set her face to him, waiting for him to begin to dilate on his fiancée's perfections, but he seemed, instead, deeply concerned about her comfort.

'Are you sure that you are warm enough?'

'Yes, quite, thank you.'

His hands were busy, eagerly, tenderly, folding the rug and her own coat about her. She grew uncomfortable, and began to talk of Dulce.

'Do you know,' she said, 'I have grown so awfully fond of Dulce lately. I was always fond of her, but I find her to be so honest, so thoroughly reliable—so——'

'She's a nice straight girl enough,' said Dyconson complacently. 'Bad dresser, though. Shocking.'

'Oh, that boa! You noticed that! But she'll learn——'

'Never!' said he. 'They go on as they begin. She's not smart, she's not even neat, confound it all! Now you——'

'Oh, don't let us discuss me!'

'Why not? Do you mind being told that you are far and away the smartest girl in the North?'

'I know I am tidy,' said Amy stiffly. 'And I promise you I'll give Dulce a few tips.'

'Tell her not to wear a pink boa, eh! and wind it round fellows' necks.'

'Oh, the wind must have done that!'

'Maybe! I shouldn't mind yours wound round my neck—on purpose. I say!'—He made a gawky, amorous

lunge in her direction—'let me have a kiss, won't you?'

'Certainly not.'

'Do you mind being kissed?'

'I loathe it!'

'Well, I won't do it against your will.'

'I should hope not.' She turned away, minimizing as far as possible the odious propinquity of the car. She was helpless, and realized that calm indifference was her only cue. He returned to the charge.

'But still you might let me! Just one!'

She groaned to evidence her boredom.

'What can it matter?' he said, surprised.

'Except to me, and—and Dulce,' she added tentatively, though by now it was plain to her that he had not proposed to her friend. She sat in outward calm, but secretly far more upset by this, to her, very ordinary incident than she would have cared to own. They were still five miles from home. It was no use sulking. Presently, thinking she had now effectually disposed of his pretensions and damped his ardour, she was minded to try to be civil. She turned towards him, but his consequent remark infuriated her.

'Do you mean to say that you can live without love?'

'Very well,' she replied, curbing her natural instinct to turn and rend him for his fatuity in supposing that, even it it were not so, he personally was capable of supplying the felt want. But argument in these cases is provocative and dangerous. He continued:

'Perhaps you don't. Old Dand——'

'I wish you would not talk to me, but attend to your driving. I hate this sort of thing.'

He remembered tardily that he was a gentleman, and apologized. 'Miss Stephens—really—I didn't mean to

offend you. I—some girls, you know—but you seem to be the kind that doesn't like being made love to.'

Amy, inclined to express her disgust at this abuse of the word, since argument was condescension, contained herself and accepted his apology. He was jubilant.

'I can't deny that I wanted to kiss you,' said he, 'for I did; I do. That needn't offend you, need it? It is a compliment when all's said and done. But I can take a plain hint when I am given it. I don't think you ought to be so cross with me, considering all things. After a long afternoon spent in getting up steam, don't you know——'

'But why—?' she got no further. She could not ask him in so many words why he had got up steam for nothing and come away without making the proposal he had contemplated. Poor Dulce! She had been too eager. Yes, she must have frightened the words back down his throat. The pink boa had been too much for him. It had suggested claws, tentacles. She saw it all. She herself took no manner of interest in this young fellow, except to admire his perfect, exquisite cleanness, so pronounced as to be almost a virtue; yet she, the woman who didn't care, had made the running! 'Not caring' was the adorable quality, unapproachable, inimitable. It was no good pretending not to care, even, for your senses found you out. She pondered these things as they made the last few miles in silence.

After dinner, Mr. Dand spoke to her.

'Well, did he?'

'Did he what?' asked Amy crossly.

'Try to kiss you?'

Amy bent her head. She was ashamed for the odious sex of whom this true indictment could be brought. She forgot to take into account that other variety of her own, whose vanity exacts, expects, and does not resent this

form of tribute, and whose favourite stalking ground for this species of amusement is in cabs, and carriages, and *vis-à-vis* conveyances of all sorts. She remembered her own arrival at Oldfort, when Mr. Dand himself had come to meet her in the brougham, prepared to drive twelve miles with the new inmate of his house in the blundering shades of night. She would now have been ashamed to admit what her first thought on seeing his figure on the platform, capped and furred, with a warm coat for her over his arm, had been. As the coachman might have easily been instructed to see to the comfort of the new companion, she had thought it likely enough that the master's solicitude was due to man's eternal preoccupation. Her experience of the sex had assured her that they were all alike. Mr. Dand would probably exact toll on the way home? Some women would have been disappointed at the innocent turn which their intercourse on those twelve dreary miles did in effect take. But Amy's satisfaction had been the prime cause of the ease and freedom with which she had subsequently found herself able to discuss every subject with Mr. Dand.

She was now strangely anxious to convince him that Dyconson's foolish caress had been evaded. She murmured something explanatory of the facts.

'Why not? He's clean!'

'If there was nothing else,' she answered disgustedly, 'there was Dulce. We had all hoped that——'

'But he has proposed for Dulce all right. He has just interviewed me.'

She bounced up. 'Then I think his conduct was simply disgraceful!'

'Dulce lit and fanned a flame she could not allay—that's all.'

'Oh, how horrible you are!'

It was not said pettishly or archly. The tears were in her eyes; she was sincerely revolted by this last revealed stage of the process, crowning the heaped-up cynicism of the day. 'Learn that men are brutes,' said her master gently. She was by way of knowing it, but his urgency filled her with disillusionment.

'Are you—all?' she murmured.

He looked at her. It was absurd, but she thought it seemed as if he must take her in his arms for the moment. Then he turned away.

'I cannot tell. . . . My own emotions are deep. . . . Go upstairs and congratulate Dulce.'

CHAPTER XIV

To the vegetable kingdom Amy, for educational purposes, conceded as much vitality as she did to animals. She was used to talk to Mr. Dand's little girl of the hornbeam as a witch among trees, and the oak as the sorcerer. Squat outspreading willows were early Victorian ladies. Ash trees were nurses, jangling their keys and very kind and motherly.

'All the trees, now,' she was saying to Erinna, as she held her at the window of the long corridor overlooking the garden, 'are getting ready for the winter, like your mother when she gets down fashion papers and settles her winter clothes. But the difference is that where we put on extra woollies, they prefer to strip. Look at that old aspen shaking its leaves hard for fear of being found still wearing them, later on, when trimmings are quite gone out of fashion.'

'It wants to be smart!' said the child, falling into her humour. 'Like mother. Here she is! Please don't drop me, Amy.'

Amy always started guiltily when Mrs. Dand surprised her recommending herself to Erinna, and trying to capture her good graces. To-day, however, Mrs. Dand's expression of peevishness had nothing whatever to do with Amy's behaviour. Erinna, a properly constituted child, loved her mother best, of course. All she said now, from a purely meddlesome point of view, was:

'Amy, you'll spoil your figure if you go lifting about a heavy child like that. Run to nursie, there's a darling. Mother wants to talk to Amy.'

'About what?' said Amy ferociously, 'if it's Dawes again I'll settle her! That woman's time in the house is getting short. . . .'

'It isn't about Dawes, it's about Dulce.'

'What about her? She and Mr. Dyconson were making ink devils together in her book in the breakfast-room a few minutes ago?'

'Then, you don't know?' Pleasure lighted up Mrs. Dand's face. For once she had succeeded in being beforehand with Amy in learning the newest news. 'Dulce is now crying her heart out. Her father sent for her this morning to his study before he went out, and it's off. Her engagement, I mean. Poor girl! I *am* sorry for her.'

'Well, but why is it off?'

'Jeremy told her that she must make up her mind to let Dyconson go, and she collapsed. I had to go in and get the story out of Jeremy. It's something about settlements. The two men can't come to an understanding, it appears. Do you know, Amy, his real name is Dickinson and he isn't such good family after all?'

'And is that why Mr. Dand has broken it off?'

'No, it's a question of money.'

'Question of time then, I suppose. Mr. Dand won't go spoiling his daughter's whole life——'

'I don't know. Jeremy is difficult to move, in some ways. Even *I* can do nothing with him, if he is really determined not to give way. It doesn't often happen that he says *no* to me, but—do you remember about those larches in the North Plantation, that I wanted cut down? He refused——'

'Yes. But what about Dulce? What shall I do?'

'Talk to Dulce and persuade her to submit herself to her father's will,'

'Tcha!' exclaimed Amy rudely, 'I never heard anything so old-fashioned. Dulce was allowed to fall in love with him, and she will have to be allowed to marry him. You can't pull things up short like that. She'll go mad——'

'She will certainly be very much disappointed. Though I don't know, perhaps she has more sense. The Dands are very matter-of-fact. I've done what I could, I'm sure. I have talked to Jeremy till my head ached. He was of course perfectly nice and gentle to me—he hates to hurt me—but I am afraid he is quite inflexible. Poor Dulce, I daresay she won't marry at all! She is so terribly plain that no man will take her without more money than Jeremy is prepared to give. How unattractive the first Mrs. Dand must have been! I am sure I hope there won't be all this difficulty about marrying Erinna.'

'Ah, she's your child!' said Amy, sidling out. She sought William Dyconson. It surprised her that no one had thought of applying remonstrance or pressure to him. He was packing, all down the corridor adjoining his room. On sight of Amy he paused, in the act of throwing a pair of trousers approximately near the portmanteau to which he destined it. He looked up.

'You have heard all about this row, I suppose,' said he savagely. 'You're the only person in this house with a head on your shoulders, except that wicked old hen they call Lady Meadrow. Yes, Papa Dand's trying to do me, and I won't stand it!'

'Sh-h!' said Amy, for the corridor had an issue, and she didn't like to hear him called Papa Dand.

'Oh, don't come here hushing me!' he retorted angrily. 'No, nor you needn't go!' as she made a move. 'I'm only blowing off steam a bit. Stay there. Take a seat.' He pushed a chair out into the corridor for her.

'And I'll go on with my packing, if you don't mind. I am in a hurry to get out of this!'

'Will you tell me exactly what has passed?' enquired Amy, pursuing the object wherefore she had sought this unpleasant interview.

'A fortnight ago he offered to give me fifty thousand with her and I took her at that, and now he wants to back out of it—that is, I'm not to have it till he dies, and he may live to any age—sturdy beggar like that! Well, I'm a plain man, and I said, I'll not take her a shilling under fifty thousand down, and that's flat!'

'I never heard anything so cold blooded and coarse!'

'Coarse? No, just business! We are both business men. But look here, now, do you—does anyone in their sober senses, think that a man in his right mind would marry Dulce for herself alone. Why, it's tommy-rot on the face of it—the face of her, rather! Look at it!'

He seized a large sized photograph in a heavy silver frame and held it out to Amy, who shrugged and turned away. He made as if to throw it down, pettishly, but Amy's eyes showed that this act she would not have borne, so he laid the likeness of the poor girl down sheepishly on the table near his elbow.

'Could anyone love that?'

'Oh, hush! You told her you did—you kissed her.'

'Kissed her, by Jove, yes. I didn't say she was repulsive, did I? As a matter of fact, I rather like the girl. I don't dislike her at all. She's clean and that, and a good straight figure, I daresay we should have got on all right. But she's not quite the girl, don't you know, to fight the world for—wants a little jam—pink frills and so on. Now you, Amy, I could imagine a man going sheer dotty about you! Let me say it! It don't hurt you. You have such good eyes—wish you'd condescend to use

them on me a bit! Then, I assure you, you could just do anything with me.'

'Well, I'll try,' said Amy, sitting down again. 'Look here, it's like this, whatever you may feel about Dulce's looks, you have no right to take them into consideration now. She has never tried to make you think her prettier than she is.'

'No, worse luck! I like a woman to make the best of herself.'

'She's too straight to do that. She's not Lady Meadrow's granddaughter, you know, but Mrs. Bowman's, and I prefer *her* style in the main. But now, Mr. Dyconson, it is between you and Dulce—style or no style. You have got her wrought up—she takes things very seriously—you can't get out of it without making her suffer abominably in her pride, as a prettier girl wouldn't, and so I don't see what you can possibly do as a gentleman, but go through with it, and try to hit it off as well as you can with her father.'

'Persuade him to stump up properly, then. He might be glad to do something handsome for the man who is willing to take his plain daughter off his hands. You could manage it, perhaps, but then you could manage anything—Amy!'

'Don't Amy me, but let us be serious. Look here, I would work it for you if I could, but it is no use bullying a man like that, and hustling him. He must be left to time. He will look after you both all right when you are married, believe me, he will be even generous, he only hates binding himself. And he is pretty safe—he has got no son.'

'How do I know he won't have one yet? No, it's no good, I clear out. The fair Dulce'll get over it. She doesn't care for me; she only cares for a husband. It

will be a lesson to her to see that her dad treats the next man better. Extraordinary fellow that father of her's. Screw loose somewhere. An awful sharp customer. But mad—mad—sheer dotty! These old families . . . they are simply rotten. Why, my own aunt——'

'Oh, yes, you are all as proud as Punch of your congenital madnesses! However, Mr. Dyconson, if you ask me, I will tell you my idea, and that is that the sharp customer you speak of has made up his mind that you won't do for his daughter—are thoroughly undeserving and unsound, in fact, and he has taken the easiest way of choking you off. We will all look after Dulce, and see that she gets over this little attack of love-measles all right. Good-bye.'

She jumped up, gave the chair she had been sitting on an efficient push back into the room, a move which nonplussed his tentative caress, and sought Mr. Dand.

'That "nice" young fellow is a perfect beast, now you've scratched him,' she said. 'I thought he was only a fool.'

'So you think I have done right?'

'It depends how Dulce takes it. I suppose it is of her welfare that you are thinking?'

'No. I can't attribute any better motive to my refusal to do a deal with Dyconson except avarice, sheer honest common avarice. I don't like "parting" and I won't.'

'I am thinking about Dulce. She will be *so* unhappy.'

'Then you think he is good enough for her?'

'No, but then he is the man she wants.'

'For the moment. But there was a man called Milliset——'

'I didn't know you knew about him?'

'There was Milliset, and there is Dyconson, and there will be another. I shall find a plain man who will marry

my plain daughter for a reasonable figure. She cannot expect to be married for anything else.'

'It is hard to have your fate depend on the turn of a cheque!' ruminated Amy aloud.

'It's the way of the world. Well, good-bye. Don't hate me. I am off to the East to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XV

'WILL Jeremy get back from Constantinople in time for the dance?'

This phrase, in universal use during the three days between the date of Dand's departure and the ball at Oldfort, reïterated absurdly in Amy Stephens' mind as, in the company of the four women who formed Jeremy Dand's household, she tumbled in the 'bus through the dark night, with everybody's skirts over her knee. Her own dress was black, all soft and draped, so it did not matter. Dulce, who was horribly glum and had several times refused to go at all, was in white, as white as her face, and had squeezed herself up into the far end of the omnibus, and meditated obviously on skulls and crossbones. Yet, Amy reflected, she was, in point of years, the youngest of them! Amy knew what was affecting her. She hoped against hope to meet Dyconson, and would then record her sensations on meeting him, in the diary she had started the moment she became miserable. Amy was privileged to read the passionate and fierce production. She always rose from its perusal with the conviction that Dulce was going mad; she meant to speak seriously to the girl's father when he returned.

But not to-night. She meant only to dance with him to-night, that is, if he should have so succeeded in abolishing the limits of time and space as to put in an appearance on such a little twopenny halfpenny occasion as the ball at the Old Assembly Rooms at Oldfort. Would he—would he manage it? Amy was as excited about it as if she had loved

him—and yet she knew that when once he was back in the house, a co-inmate with her, as before, she would have no inclination even to flirt with him. It was an effect of glamour cast over the commonplace by the sense of long distances accomplished.

She was, however, mysteriously assured that she would see him to-night. He would surely be there, spruce in his evening clothes and his round shoulders somewhat straightened for the occasion. She would soon see him, pulling on a pair of white gloves, his practised dancer's eye roving all over the room convening his partners, the man who all the night before had been covering Austria, Germany and France in the Orient express, crossing frontiers in the dark, holding up his papers to be peered at by the dim glimmer of official lanterns. She knew every step of his procedure. He would arrive calmly at Oldfort, change at his office, get into his motor and sample the waxed floor of the Assembly Rooms before another dawn had lightened the gay vigil and paled the gas lamps of the country town.

'I shall keep three for Rémy, he is far and away the best dancer I ever knew,' announced Lady Meadrow, to Mrs. Bowman, who in her snowy stiff net ruffles and cap looked like a grave Rembrandt grandmother facing a sportive Spring by Botticelli. The two old ladies were more or less of an age, and Amy, in her tolerance, would not have had either of them change the parts which they both played so well. Lady Meadrow's skilful décolletage was a miracle of skill; there was something piquant in Mrs. Bowman's abnegation of the lures of the flesh. She did not dance—but she supped.

'You and I, my dear,' she remarked to her sulky daughter-in-law, 'must chaperon these three young things.'

'Don't rub it in, Jeremy's mother, please,' the young

matron pleaded. She had never at the best of times been counted a good dancer, but she bitterly resented the infraction of her pleasures entailed now and then by the performance of her wifely duties. Mr. Dand wanted an heir. 'You know how fond I am of dancing and going about, and life is rather tiresome for me just now!'

'Well, but what are you, Edith—let me see? Twenty-seven! It is rather late for you to be going on with your dancing, any how. I gave it up when I was twenty-five, on the stroke. I was still in my very prime, but I was determined that no man—or boy, for it is mostly beardless youths from school one has to wrestle with nowadays—should call mine a duty dance. I have had men say to me, "Oh, sorry, I must give poor Miss So-and-so a turn!" To me, but never *of* me!'

'Well, I don't know,' said Lady Meadrow, 'one is as young as one looks and I was always able to trust the men for that.'

'Certainly, men don't err on the side of flattery, unless you put pressure on them. Their tacit opinion is all that is of value.'

'You are thinking of your undergraduate admirers, are you not, dear Phœbe? But a man of the world, always prefers a woman old enough to understand him. Indeed, dear Sir Mervyn used to say that my only fault was that I was too young for him to take advantage of. He called me Una——'

'Oh, mamma,' broke in her daughter, 'do for goodness sake spare us old Sir Mervyn and his opinions. He was a perfectly horrid old man, so I always thought, even when he gave me chocolates, and never spoke sincerely in his life unless it was something indecent!'

'Edith, I cannot allow you to speak so of my friend. He was one of the greatest men of his time and he did

your mother the honour to admire her. You were a child, chocolates were the only way to appeal to you——'

'Yes, he'd got to appeal to everybody, even to a child in short frocks. He would have made love to Amy, if she had been about the house in his time.'

Amy, quiet under the heavy skirts of the two disputants, realized, with pleasure, that Mr. Johnson had not betrayed her so far. 'I am much obliged to him,' she thought, 'and I'll give him a dance or a sit-out, whichever he likes.'

'Excepting myself,' murmured Mrs. Bowman. 'Amy here is dressed the oldest. And I should have said that she was too pale for black.'

'I'm rather jealous of her in it all the same. It sends up her *mat* white complexion,' said the other old lady, 'I wish I had her black and she my pink. Only, my dear, you do really want a little make up! It is silly to stand out against it.'

'You might as well, Amy,' said Dulce roughly, from her corner. 'Why be singular? Even Dawes makes up on Sundays. I have seen her slinking out——'

'Red-lipped and in a nice brown toupée, too,' said Mrs. Bowman, 'Amy, I wonder you don't speak to her.'

'Why should I interfere with the liberty of the subject? "Dye and let dye,"' retorted Amy. 'So long as she does her work, I have nothing to do with her weekly complexion.'

'Let her follow, in fact, where her betters lead,' began Mrs. Bowman. 'Oh, we're there!'

For an unearthly bump testified to a collision with the horse-block at the door of the old Jacobean Hall where these rites were held.

'Does anyone see Jeremy?' asked Edith. 'He might have managed to be there to help us out.'

Amy's heart fell, as she replied:

'No. I can only see Mr. Johnson trying to assimilate his white kid gloves.'

'He will have to be our cavalier,' said Lady Meadrow, 'till Jeremy comes. Why doesn't the silly man come forward and help us out? I am not so good at leaving the carriage without showing my ankles, as I once was.'

'I'll get out first, as I have got no calves,' said Amy reassuringly. It was her testimony to the fact that women, as a rule, abhor all forms of fleshy development.

Amy, as the due expression of her gratitude, danced with Mr. Johnson, who cut, however, as she had expected, a very poor figure in a ballroom. She saw herself with the introspective eye of a specialist in the art, turning patiently round and round in the too close but ineffectual grip of the author, and was not enamoured of the spectacle they must æsthetically both present. But Mr. Dand was not there. She chattered prettily away to Mr. Johnson, and pretended to want a rest as often as she dared.

Sometimes, when they sat down, she looked at him slily, sideways, and remembered him in the old days, and saw again the disgusted expression of his face, as they bent over the dead body of Sir Mervyn together, and again when he had closed the door of Sir Mervyn's study on her and hindered her from securing her legacy. And he was the man who had refused to marry her, because he thought she was not respectable! She wondered how many other pairs of partners in the room had quite such an uncomfortable set of recollections between them? She would become a little abstracted. Then Johnson, the potential villain of her story, would boyishly polish his ivory forehead, and suggest 'Another turn?'

'I'm tired,' she said curtly, in reply to his latest attempt to lure her back to ignominy. Her flow of pretty

ballroom conversation also ceased abruptly. Mr. Johnson looked round with newly awakened suspicion. Jeremy Dand had come in!

Amy's partner led her to a buffet. His expression had changed and he looked as novelists must look when they have come to the chapter embodying the crux of their narrative. Amy soon realized that she had, diplomatically speaking, made a fool of herself, and for what? The prospect of changing a bad partner for a good one and some of the latest on dits of Constantinople. That was all, but Mr. Johnson's suspicions had been awakened, and she could no longer treat the guilty knowledge between them as a joke. She would have preferred to vanish like Lamia, after the sage Appollonius had spoken. No use. She must stand and deliver.

'Did you know that Mr. Dand, who has just come in, as I see you observe, is by way of being a splendid performer in this line?' he asked her, bending on her his clumsy inquisitorial gaze.

'Yes, I had heard so from Lady Meadrow.'

'Here she is on her son-in-law's arm.' Mr. Johnson's little, single-candle-power eyes were still fixed, ridiculously, on Amy's face.

'He wouldn't be a good detective!' Amy gibed, to give herself courage, as she stood still and heard Jeremy Dand ask his mother-in-law shortly and perfunctorily to state her wishes in the way of sustenance.

'What will you have, Poupée?'

Mr. Dand's voice caused her no obvious, because no real, emotion, whatever, though she had not seen him for fourteen days. Such nonsense it all was! She was surprised at herself, for certainly the rumour of his coming had produced in her a certain amount of excitement. She could not deny it. But the tides of emotion flow oddly

and capriciously, and have a way of leaving you high and dry, stranded on a rock, when you have expected to be utterly submerged. If she was surprised Mr. Johnson was disappointed. She could discover it in his face, as he registered her own mild degree of elation.

Mr. Dand made no haste to reach Amy's side, moreover, although he must have seen her, as he passed, with his *exigeante* relation on his arm. Mr. Johnson's characters had refused to keep pace with his plot. Amy's spirits rose and she considered the possibility of strangling this latest literary creation at birth.

'Shall we go and sit down somewhere?' Johnson was saying, with some meaning. 'Or would you rather stay about here?'

'So that Mr. Dand can ask me to dance,' said she boldly. 'No, thank you. That will come all in good time. Meanwhile, I should rather like a word with you!'

'You frighten me!' said Johnson, and indeed he looked frightened.

'I know because you are an author,' said Amy, leading him to a long empty committee room covered and cheered up with red baize, 'that you see romance in everything, even in rolling stones.'

'Neither you nor Jeremy Dand are stones,' said Mr. Johnson.

'Well, we both roll. But I am glad you are willing to come straight to the point. It makes it easier. Do you know there is a fatal fascination about talking to you on this subject which I have tried to resist and cannot, though it is most disagreeable to me. I don't suppose I can do any good, but I may as well try to diplomatize a bit.'

'You are afraid of my betraying you?' said Mr. Johnson.

'No, not actually afraid, but I want to know if you have done so, or intend doing so. I do not forget that you have got me turned out of one situation already.'

'There was then the future of a young boy to be considered.'

'And what harm am I about to do now?'

'You can break up another home.'

'But, good God, you seem to consider me an adventuress.'

'I do. It is your type. A sort of Sidonia, like the heroine of the mediæval tale.'

'Mediæval, indeed! Family Herald; more! You tell yourself tales, you weave a plot round me, and hope it will develop itself without giving your invention any further trouble, but all the while I know you know that I am perfectly innocent. You who know the circumstances! Tell me, hadn't I to make my living like yourself, like everybody? I couldn't pay for a chaperon, could I? Was I to refuse a good situation, for fear of losing my reputation? Who on earth cared about my reputation? My dead father? My mad mother, in Pottinger's Asylum? Of course, if anyone were to take the trouble to say nasty things, I don't deny that the situation lent itself admirably, but who was going to bother about me, except to be spiteful, and that is no trouble, ever. I suppose I annoyed you in the old days—supplanted you? It's a cheap revenge you're going in for, Mr. Johnson.'

He stirred uneasily under her glance.

'One realizes that you have been much abused.'

'Don't use that horrid word about me! I don't want your pity or anybody's pity. All I want to know is what weapons I have got to protect myself with, and who is "out" against me. Then I can fight. Are you my enemy?'

'Only under certain contingencies.'

'What are they?'

'I have not as yet breathed a word of the incidents of your career and the interpretation that has necessarily been put upon them, in this household nor will I, unless loyalty to my friend and his wife appear to me to demand it. Then—for I conceive that I owe no loyalty to you——'

'Nobody does, hang it all!"

'Under those circumstances, I shall have to speak. Miss Stephens, when I saw you to-night, I was appalled by the manifestation of emotions that might submerge our quiet lives here in horror. I saw your eyes glisten when He came into the room—your very sentences came broken from your lips—you exhibited every symptom of amorous disturbance known to me! I began to wonder if it was even now too late to save him?'

'To get me chucked, you mean. Well, Mr. Johnson, I will tell you quite frankly, I don't want to be chucked.'

'Naturally not.'

'Ah, but my reason is such a little reason—a very young one. It is not that I am in love with Mr. Dand. I am not. I am not in love with anybody. I attempt from Love's sickness to fly, like the man in the song. I don't believe in it. How should I? I am not young, and every man who has ever said he cared for me has made trouble for me, one way or another. Love is so cheap. There must be something better, for us who are tired of it—mortally sick of the very sound of it, echoing through the world, upsetting everything, putting everybody by the ears! I believe I could get on better with you, who have honestly refused, on principle, to have anything to do with me in that way, than any man who was likely to persecute and disturb me with professions of love. If

only I could once for all convince you of my aims and motives! Could I not? Am I not frank enough?'

'No woman is frank when her heart is concerned.'

'Yes, I daresay she's a monster of diplomacy, *if* her heart is concerned. But mine isn't, you see. You speak conventionally, like a novelist. The novelist interests me more to talk to, in a general way, but couldn't you put him aside for a moment, and be a man? Believe that I am oldish, a weary, cynical, anæmic woman, quite out of court for that sort of thing. Lead a man on! Me! But there is a member of the Dand household that I do adore, only that person's years number not more than five. I will do anything sooner than lose my place near her, and surely, you see that an intrigue with her father would be the easiest way to secure dismissal by the mother? Of course I do like and appreciate Mr. Dand—one can hardly help it, considering his context. He shines, by contrast. I don't love him as you do, but I cannot help seeing that he is the only intelligent person, barring yourself, in the house since poor Dulce got so queer. And such a dead weight of dull women, too, as we carry! I cannot say I care much for the society of women. I have gone about the world a good deal, and I have always somehow got talking to men, and heard men's view of things!'

'Yes, the old ladies are dreary old Parcae,' said Mr. Johnson, 'spinning the most useless of webs. And you are a clever, all round woman who thinks and reads. Well, listen, I will propose a test—do you agree to it?'

'I will try. What is it?'

'Don't dance with Jeremy to-night on any pretext whatever.'

'I never heard such a stagey proposition in my life!'

'It will satisfy me,' said Johnson. 'Do you agree to it?'

'Oh, yes, but I am rather sorry all the same.'

'Ah there you are! I knew I was right.'

'Do you suppose, if I loved him, I should be only *rather* sorry? Ah, Mr. Johnson, learn your trade. I am sorry because Mr. Dand is by far and away the best dancer in the room, and I adore dancing. Now let us go back, and put me through my trial.'

'Do you despise me?' he asked.

'Yes, a little.'

'I almost wish, Amy Stephens, that I had married you after all.'

'And got your fifteen thousand pounds! On the contrary that is the only action on your life for which I do not despise you. I did not think you had it in you to refuse even a bitter pill like me, with all that jam!'

'But, Amy——'

'Amy, now!'

'You have commanded my respect by the way you have carried this through. You have a courage, a power of expression——'

'Yes, I am rather proud of it myself,' replied Amy smiling and flirting her fan. She was one of those suburban minded persons who still believe that much can be done with a fan, and refuse to abandon it at the dictate of fashion. 'And now, Mr. Johnson, now that we have thrashed it out satisfactorily, I don't see why we should not be friends, do you? I am quite an admirer of yours —of your art. . . .' she added hastily, for there was no one else in the annexe and the feeling that dictated the clumsy and amateurish movement he made towards her was unmistakable. . . .

Amy did not even take her hand away, she looked at it lying in his.

'I have not spoken so very well,' she said gravely, 'unless

I have convinced you that that sort of thing isn't in my line.'

A figure appeared at the far end of the pathway of red baize, and Mr. Johnson flung her hand away. 'Sh-h!' he exclaimed nervously. 'Here's Dand. Now, mind your promise!'

'You fool!' Amy cried to him, as she rose to her feet, scenting work to do, and a possible call on her energies. 'Can't you see he is not coming to ask me to dance? What is it, Mr. Dand? You look upset?'

'Dulce! She started to walk home an hour ago, in her ball dress!'

CHAPTER XVI

It was three days after the ball. Dulce had been retrieved by the police on the road to Swarland Moor in a half fainting condition with her wet drabbled, tattered ball-dress clinging round her heels. Impeded in this manner, she had yet managed to get the start of her father and the constable in the motor for more than a mile, for she had walked fast and with the feverish determination of the partially alienated.

The whole country-side was now convinced that Miss Dand of Swarland was mad. She was on the verge of becoming so. Such a thin borderline separates eccentricity like hers from absolute alienation. Amy meant to save her from this curse of lovelorn maidenhood.

She stole into the girl's room one morning and contemplated her.

Dulce's uneasy eyes were covered by the bloated white lids, but suggested peace none the more for that. Her nose, with the touch of aquiline that dignified it and gave her at her best the air of a clever intellectual boy, was whitened uncomfortably on the ridge. Her skin, tightly drawn over her cheeks, was scarred and blotched hideously. Ill health from below rose and stained it, the surface was not attended to as it used to be. She had been not so very plain—now she was almost revolting.

'All this would go at once,' murmured Amy, 'if—well, I must work it.'

Her own room and Dulce's overlooked the small and damp stone-paved yard whence, through the night, there had mounted to Amy from below the querulous barking

of a puppy. It was squealing now, faintly. Amy frowned and stooped, and without waking the sleeper abstracted a key from under her pillow.

It was seven o'clock. Hatless, shod, however in strong working boots, Amy issued forth into the early dews and damps of the morning. In the yard she met a frowsy undressed individual, who, when properly attired, showed well on the box of Mrs. Dand's carriage. He touched his cap, and Amy showed him the key.

'You have got all my things, Hodges?' she asked, as they moved together in the direction of a small neglected looking shed near the greenhouses.

'Yes, miss. The ointment and all. I am sure I hope it will do the poor beast good.'

There was in the cold bleak outhouse some scanty straw and a young greyhound crouched in a corner. It licked, it nosed, it tore at its skin in a most distressing manner.

'Miss!' exclaimed the coachman in tones of horror. 'I doubt if we'll ever cure that!'

'It's a puppy, it's got just a chance. Be quick, Hodges, give me the stuff, or she'll catch me. And mind, we're going to lose this key.'

'But Miss Dulce'll never forgive us!'

'I'll see to that. The beast mustn't die, whatever she says.'

'And, miss,' said Hodges, as together they attended to the dog, 'what about the St. Bernard pup?'

'Is that the one that has kept me awake all night howling?'

'Yes. It's in the little courtyard under your window. His kennel's too small for him.'

'Take him out then and put him somewhere else.'

'I dursn't, miss. She says on no account interfere, that she's going to take sole care of her own pets. Care!

I saw her only yesterday feeding that pup with lumps of cold potato as big as your hand and now, of course, he's got to have medicine."

'Are you to give it?'

'Not on my life, miss. Forbid to touch it.'

Amy said nothing more, but carefully and methodically finished the greyhound's treatment. She and Hodges came out together, closing the door behind them, but neglecting to lock it. Amy then carefully dropped the key into the recesses of a cucumber frame, Hodges regarding her with increasing admiration the while.

'Now, where's the puppy that cries?'

The solid yellow ball, like an undersized nigger-baby that came out of the half of a kennel in the yard under Dulce's window, certainly looked as if it never could be got in again. Amy put it down on the floor of the yard and it fell over helplessly on its side, She looked away and as if she were going to cry. Hodges was upset too.

'The poor beast ain't got the proper use of its limbs, miss. Stands to reason, cooped up in a place like that!'

'I think that's rheumatism, Hodges. The yard is too dark and damp for it. Anyway it isn't going into that yard or that hutch any more. Now, what!'

A window over their heads was raised, and a touzled head was craned out. Amy holding the dog in her arms, looked up intrepidly.

'Put that dog back at once,' Dulce shrieked.

'No,' said Amy.

'Do as I tell you.'

'No.'

'Is it my dog or is it yours?'

'Yours—unfortunately.'

'I insist on being obeyed.'

'I can't take up my time in stuffing a dog into a kennel

that's too small for it to please anybody. Besides it is ill. Put your head in and get some clothes on. I am coming up to you to explain.'

Dulce was lying on the floor of her room, half-dressed.

'Oh, misery! Misery! I can keep neither a dog nor a lover! All, all, are taken from me!'

'Dear——'

'Don't touch me, you brute!'

'I will not, indeed,' said Amy, going aimlessly towards a little table on which lay a half finished letter in Dulce's affected staring handwriting. Her eye fell on it. She read it, seized and tore it up.

'Amy! Have you taken leave of your senses!'

'No, we'll both keep them, if you please. But you shall not buy more animals to kill. That order shan't go.'

'Shan't it? I can write another.'

'It shall not be posted.'

'How are you going to manage? Are you going to lock me into my own father's house?'

'With your own father's permission, and his key, if you persist. Dulce, be reasonable. These two beasts that you have got are the only survivors, you have killed six by neglect and want of knowledge, and all in three months. It is only a fad, you don't really love animals, why not go back to collecting Yellow Books and Wilde poems—much more ladylike pursuit.'

'How dare you chaff me, you underbred creature! O God! How have you managed to get such a weird influence over me and over us all! You are like a vampire in this house and deserve to have a stake driven through your body. I'll do it too and rid the world of you. We'll bury you at the cross roads——'

'Dear Dulce, don't drivel. You had far better make

use of my weird influence as you call it. I would do anything to help you, except help you to kill dogs. . . . Ah-h! Drop it! You'd better!'

For the girl had seized a large Black Forest peasant knife that lay on the table and flung it at Amy with all the force of which she was capable, and she was strong. Luckily her power of direction was weaker and the knife stuck quivering in the thin partition wall beside Amy's head.

'Well, you did frighten me!' said Amy, pulling the knife out of the old plaster, that followed it in a thin dusty stream. 'Now this clinches it!'

She picked up the puppy and reversed the key of the door so as to be able to lock it after her. She was careful not to turn her face away from the shivering maniac who had slunk into a corner and contemplated her with wild mournful eyes, murmuring, 'Amy, Amy, forgive me! Forgive me! I meant to hit you.'

'Jolly bad shot you are, then,' muttered Amy as she left the room.

It was a Sunday morning. Mr. Dand was in his study. The breakfast gong had not yet sounded.

'Look at this,' said Amy quietly, going up to him.

'A St. Bernard pup, isn't it. Rather a fine specimen. Dulce's?'

She put it down. 'See, it can't stand.'

'It's legs do seem queer.'

'Dulce has bought eight dogs since September. Six have died. Two are left. This one's legs are atrophied and the other one is covered with eczema. The others have all died, in various degrees of torment. Yet she doesn't mean to be cruel. You must pay Mr. Dyconson what he asks.'

'You do jump from one subject to another!'

'But the sequence is perfectly clear to me and I will make it so to you. Dulce is going mad—not because she is an old family,' she sneered sweetly, 'but because you won't give her the man she wants. He happens to be a cur, and he won't take her without your money. If he doesn't take her, she'll go mad. What are you going to do?'

'Nothing, I think, in spite of your eloquent theorizing. If the man's a cur, Dulce should not marry him, if she is mad, he must not marry her.'

'She isn't mad—yet.'

'No, of course she is not mad. I don't for one moment admit that your diagnosis is correct. Buying dogs and neglecting them isn't enough to satisfy the Lunacy Commissioners, of whom I happen to be one. Did you know that?'

'There are other things——' said Amy vaguely.

'Other things on a par with the little inconvenient trick you have adduced. I am not going to shut my daughter up, or marry her to a cad on that. She must go away.'

'And trail her misery through every watering-place in Europe, to come home at last incurable. Oh, I have seen them. And, look here, you would want me to take her? I couldn't. She hates me. As you won't be convinced you must have it all. She threw a knife at me.'

'When?'

'Just now.'

'You are not exaggerating?'

'I tell the truth.'

'It missed you?'

'Naturally, since I am here.'

He sat down. His chin fell. He played with a paper-knife and spoke in a changed voice. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Get Dyconson back. Recover him.'

'No.'

'Then lose me. I cannot stay here to be knifed. You will have to let me go, and get a keeper for your daughter.'

'Lose you? And do you think you are of value to me?'

'I don't think. I know I am.' She smiled.

'Well, you have a good conceit of yourself.' He rose and went to the window with his hands in his pockets. Amy waited. He came back. 'No, it is true, you are the only thing in the world I would not willingly lose.'

'Mercy!' said Amy, as one receiving a too heavily loaded compliment. 'Do you know, you quite overwhelm me?'

'I should think I did. A woman doesn't get a declaration every day. I meant it, Amy.'

'Well, then,' she replied seriously, 'it is obvious what you must do. Meet me.'

'I ask nothing better. Where?'

'Mr. Dand, do be serious—I mean, in this. You must come to an arrangement with Mr. Dyconson, and see what he will take to save your daughter from a lunatic asylum.'

'You put things crudely, but I like it. I like everything you do. I never knew a woman with fewer absurd feminine prejudices.'

'I wish I had a few more,' said Amy, 'and then perhaps people would like me better.'

'Didn't I say I loved you?'

'Yes, but I meant outsiders, like—well, don't let us waste time, what are we going to do?'

'You understand that I am not going to have you driven out of the house if the expenditure of a few paltry thousands will avert it.'

'I don't care why you do it, if you do,' said Amy. 'And meantime, pending negotiations with the bashful

suitor, would you please forbid Dulce to buy any more dogs. I happen to know that she is cleaned out. Her allowance is due. Don't pay it. Back me up and I will look after these two poor creatures we have already. And I must sleep in Dulce's room.'

'That I forbid.'

'But she can't possibly be left alone at present.'

'We'll get an attendant.'

'And drive her quite out of her mind? No, it will be all right I assure you. I will tell you what you *can* do. There is a spare room next door to Dulce's. You might come and sleep there, and I will have the wardrobe which is at present in front of the door of communication moved.'

'And then will you leave the door ajar?'

'Yes, if you like, but really there is no need. I am not afraid of Dulce. I left her begging my pardon all over the place. She is sorry, and she will simply adore me now, when I tell her that I have prevailed over you. . . . Now, don't frown.'

'I don't like the word "prevailed."'

'But still,' said Amy, 'you would prefer me to be armed against attack as far as possible, and her thinking that would no doubt be my best weapon.'

'Very well. Tell her what you like. You can take it that you have prevailed. And if you will tell me what I can do for you to show my gratitude, it shall be done.'

He spoke with unconscious magniloquence. Amy gathered up the puppy, and paused on the threshold. . . . A little idle smile was on her proud mouth, as if now, that great and weighty matters were settled and done with, she had all the leisure in the world to chaff and laugh. This easy abolishing of strenuousness was one of her charms. She softly threw these words at him.

'You can raise my salary if you like.'

'I will.' But his brows came together. 'How much do you ask?'

'Nonsense, I was only teasing. Be easy, I have quite as much as I want. Do you really suppose I would be so cruel as to demand an increase of you?'

'Do you think I am a miser?'

'I don't think—I know it!' she said, laughing.

CHAPTER XVI

"H. Dulce Dyconson. Isn't my new name sweet?'

This was the ending to a letter bearing the U. S. A. postmark which Amy read, complacently, sitting one evening in early spring on a long garden seat, placed in the darker, more overgrown side of the garden, and under the open windows of the drawing-room. The twilight soothed her, she was a moral Titan at rest, an Atlas with the weight of a whole British household on her little sloping, slightly curved shoulders.

The entire winter had been occupied with Dulce and Dulce's doings. There had been a delay in the fulfilment of her engagement with Dyconson, but it was not occasioned by money difficulties, and Dulce, once her fortunes had taken this desirable turn, grew dulcet, like her name, and placable, and purchased no more dogs or mongooses. Her wedding had taken place in February. Amy and Erinna had been among her bridesmaids. 'I am far too old,' Amy had protested, but Dulce, who was good stuff and grateful, had insisted. She had actually been married for her money, through Amy's instrumentality, and she knew it, but meant, notwithstanding the ugly fact, to be very happy. It was all right, if a little unromantic. Affairs having arranged themselves satisfactorily, on a cash basis, Dyconson had come back and resumed his interrupted courtship like a lamb. He had had the courage of his pocket and his 'place,' and Dulce on her side had obliged him by getting rid of the idol from Benin and the mongoose, which both smelt disagreeable, and wearing stays and waving her hair.

Though Amy was delighted with the letter, she was so weary to-day that she let the hand that held this joyful guarantee of Dulce's sanity, hang down by her side in a way that expressed her extreme lassitude. She was tired of being cook. Edith's protégée and the rescued remnants of her morals had gone down in a blaze of domestic complications and village scandals. Hodges had left too. Her angry father had taken Annie Dawes away, four days ago, and Mr. Dand had engaged to do his best to procure a substitute in Oldfort. Meantime Amy's back ached, and her cheeks burned, and she thought of the kitchen fire as an immoral agent and wondered not at all that cooks as a race, were heady and lax, and ultra emotional. She had often noticed these wretched guardians of the hearth crawling, from their reeking kitchens into areas to breathe. She understood now the weariness that craves stimulants or at least air. For the last three days she had eaten scarcely anything, and water from the spring was never cold enough.

'As pants the hart'—she said to herself—'so do I, for a cook! Those poor greedy old things! I can only think of them, just now, as so many stomachs!'

She was alluding to two Early Victorian shapes who wandered in mushroom hats and carrying preposterous art reticules, through the shadowy groves and alleys of the Swarland garden. They appeared and disappeared alternately, in slow procession, intercepted now and again by this or that clump of hollies, as in a dream of Verlaine. It was March, but warm as May. Yet Amy was careful. Across the wide lawn, whose outermost rim was lost in mystery and night, a white robed nurse and child hurried in, by Amy's order, to the sheltering lights of the house, which burst into radiance one by one as the servants within lit them. Amy did not approve of the

child being out after dusk, so she refrained from calling it to her side and so delaying the folding of the lamb. Edith Dand was strumming in the drawing-room, whose open windows gave on to the back of the bench where Amy was sitting. She was happy, delivering her soul. Amy had no music in her, so Mrs. Dand's wrong notes were of small consequence. . . .

Presently the master of the house drew up his great silent motor in front of the door. A servant came out, messages and parcels were given. Then, still wearing the great fur coat Amy had once worn, he came up and sat down on the seat at some distance from her.

The nurse and child had gone in, and one of the old women, who took an hour-and-a-half to dress for dinner. The flicker of Mrs. Bowman's strong violet skirt up an alley was all that remained of chaperonage except Edith Dand's music.

'Have you got one?' Amy asked, without moving.

'Yes. She comes in to-morrow evening.'

'Is she a better cook than me?'

'She has more testimonials to that effect. But I doubt if she will please me as well? Besides, she asks too high wages.'

'Yes, you are both a gourmand and a miser.'

Her fatigue made her careless, rude. On the other hand the day's work had taken the retort, courteous and uncourteous, out of him. They both sat in weary unqualified silence at different ends of the bench. The smell of the privet bush beside them was almost too over-powering to be pleasant. She wondered if he really liked it, he was very sensitive to odours or pretended to be. . . .

The uneasy unconvincing chords that were ground out of the instrument in their rear certainly annoyed him, for he groaned.

'My wife, pouring out her whole soul at the piano!'

'Some people can,' said Amy a little scornfully.

'But not you and I, eh? We keep our souls to themselves, our deep, patient, divided souls. . . .'

'Divided?' said she dreamily, surprised but not annoyed.

'Yours and mine—a pair, if ever there was one. But, if——'

'But, the quarrelsome word,' remarked Amy, lazily heading him off personalities. 'If, the peacemaker!'

'You can keep me in order without quoting Shakespeare, I think,' he said. 'Why on earth should you be afraid of talking about your innocent, clean-living soul with me? I am perfectly safe. I am old, set, sane, not a counter jumper, simmering with sexual vanity. I can talk of visions without wanting to incorporate them then and there, of hopes without attempting to realize them.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't be so unimaginative! I mean, you can trust me not to sidle along this bench and put my arm round you. You are very tired with cooking my dinner for me, too stupid with physical fatigue to have your wits about you, too tired to resist me, in fact! So you are safe from me, and you know it.'

'Much obliged, I am sure,' said Amy, in her fatigue and uneasiness, mechanically reverting to one of the current forms of rebuff in use in her earlier surroundings.

'It is only surface commonness,' he assured her cheerfully, 'makes you answer me like that. You have got a good way beyond Surbiton by now. . . . The truth is, you are not in the least afraid of me, or anything I may say or do. . . . And as for the ordinary manifestations of a man's interest in a woman, you know I am not the sort of man to give way to them. If ever I

do embrace you, Amy, we won't play at it. I am a *raffiné*—I have my own code of self-indulgence. I say, not quite with the poet Gay—"*More ord'nary lips may serve people for kissing!*" With you, I don't know how it is, but I am content to sit here in the shadow of my own house, with my belongings all round me, and listen to the little angry scrunch of the gravel under your heel'—Amy suppressed that gesture, he knew she was cross, then!—'smell the sour smell of privet, and stare at that dark clump of arbour vitae with the tobacco plant white against it, and wonder at the absurdly patchy arrangement of the things that matter—if they do matter? Who cares whether you and I come together or not? Not nature, at any rate! Still, the clumsy arrangement serves, for want of a better, and I have sworn, you know, never to touch the pendulum.'

His eyes rested on her, tenderly, as Edith's rested on her flowers and Dulce's on her tortoise. The same glance, pressed into so many different services.

'I look at you now,' he continued, 'and note how nicely you come in the picture. I would not take you out of it for a moment or attempt to vulgarize you in any way.'

'Vulgarize me?'

'It would be vulgar to corrupt you, wouldn't it? Unnecessary, too! To break up this lovely peace and let the world into our affairs. No one should ever be permitted to know who is in love with who. Blatancy ruins all. And to get on to the other side—to gain another platform or resting place, one has to go through so much red tape. No more quiet evenings like this, but interviews, lawyer's letters, agitating posts! No, no, I am yours, certainly I am, you are the right woman for me, I have settled that long ago, but all the same I prefer to let well alone!'

'My goodness!' said Amy. 'How you talk!'

'There's a certain amount of discomfort certainly, some unsatisfied yearnings, hauntings of a world of joys not realized, all the emotions are here, in fact, but in tolerably stable equilibrium——'

Amy, from being uneasy, turned to laughter. She was amused, not disquieted. No real lover ever said such things! Her merriment, gentle, low, and childish, was reassuringly heart whole. He truly at that moment desired her happiness, and he smiled at her.

'But it is all true enough. I am not talking for effect. I am too comatose for that, and so are you. I am permanently tired out with collecting money—my low fad. I overwork myself as a means to a mean end. That's why I don't feel inclined to alter anything—even if you did. I dote upon peace and it is very nearly perfect peace here, except for my wife's damned untidy piano playing. And I can endure that too, for it puts you at your ease.'

'All the same, I know what I ought to do,' said she, wistfully.

'What?'

'Go in to her.'

'This isn't a ball that you need go and seek your chaperon. And you are not a child, Amy. I suppose you are shocked at my talking coolly of matters that you would prefer left in the clouds? You would like me to go subtly about convincing you that I admire you, in the ordinary way, compliments, glances, and perhaps presents? Nothing overt, in the way of words, that you are sorry to have to resent for form's sake! I know you all. But that isn't my way. See this, Amy, you have unfortunately come to be boxed up in a lonely country house with one rather odd sort of man, who calls things by their right names. There's no escape for you from any form I choose to cast my liking for you into. I am

king here. Be prepared for any development of the affair except one, and that you needn't be afraid of. . . . But I confess I am a little disappointed in you. It's always the same. Scratch a Bohemian and you find a conventional!'

Amy half rose. This last insinuation truly offended her. She had thought herself so broad, so tolerant of his absurd lucubrations.

'No, stay. I mean no manner of harm. And you control the situation, don't you? I am very biddable—not at all unruly? Here am I, exiled to the farthest end of the bench, and I undertake to come no nearer. My dear girl, do think of it for a moment and you will see that I am treating you quite fairly. Honestly, the ways of men and women are not nearly so complicated as novelists will have it in the interests of their trade, just as lawyers try to persuade you that the law is an ass, and that they are indispensable. Women if treated squarely, as I am treating you, respond all right. You grasp my attitude towards you—or if you don't I'll explain more fully?'

'No, don't,' said she, half afraid, half eager.

'You know it. I was perfectly explicit with you the day you came into my study, and forced me to give my daughter to young Dyconson on pain of losing you. Yes, I prefer you to any other person in the world. I would rather spend my life with you than anyone else. I feel as a man feels towards the woman he desires—think your mouth beautiful and want to kiss it—but I also prefer to keep you as you are—an inmate of my house, a constant source of joy to me, and able to meet my wife's eyes. You could not bear it if it were otherwise. That's your point of honour. You see I know it. I should have to take you away, and I am not going to, even if you would

come. . . . Have you observed, Amy, that while making you a handsome present of my sentiments towards you, I have not so much as attempted to ascertain yours to me?'

'I don't know them,' she murmured sweetly. She was lulled into quiescence by the knowledge that no amorous decision, no conventional ultimatum was expected of her. She was both flattered and pleased. She had not consciously expected this declaration, yet perhaps her woman soul had been aware all the while—had even hoped?

Amy was too wise to consider herself responsible for the dark doings of the spirit in anyone, to try to account for the crude combinations of the atoms of will and predilection. She was only blessedly sure that her virtue was not going to be put to the proof, and that no trial of her savage and primitive sense of loyalty towards the lawful wife whose stormy playing brooded over this interview was contemplated. She sat there, quite still, a white, heavily-posed, yet lax figure, with soft rounded shoulders ready to fold inside a man's protecting arm.

'No,' Dand went on, answering his last question himself. 'Of course you don't know your own feelings. Very few women do, unless they are pedants, and dishonest with themselves, you are neither. I will tell you what I know of your emotions, and their probable course. It will amuse us. I am vain, as you know, of my professional knowledge, so gratify your professor by listening to him. Well, your moods will change, and waver, and intensify and diminish—but of this I am sure, it will not be indifference, that you feel for me. More possibly hatred —temporary or permanent?'

'How do you mean? I am interested.'

'Well, you are to imagine your more feminine self coming to resent my beautiful attitude of reserve? Sup-

pose woman's innate recklessness and curious love of extremes, that she is pleased to style the lust of self-sacrifice, gets uppermost? Women like you, the least sensual possible, but still sensual, women who live by their heads, not their hearts, are subject, nevertheless, to bursts of natural feeling, wafts from the pit—bless you! Then we get subconscious huffs, hysterical rancours, physical clamourings of nature denied. Don't be offended, you are not responsible, poor patient! What you have got to consider is, that this isn't the most important part of you, or of anyone's economy. All you have to do, is to keep a cool head, hold on, don't chuck it. Every emotion has its day and then dies down, and is quiescent. But the need of sympathetic companionship that you can't get rid of, and a sense that you have somehow rather mysteriously attained to it, endures. If I can bear it, you can. . . . Amy, what a gentlewoman you are to listen to me patiently like this, and not protest against my fatuity! Why don't you snub me, and declare that I am nothing to you and never will be? Most women who knew how to protect themselves would. . . . Give me your hand.'

She rose, and gently, like one in an Utopian dream of perfection, laid her hand in his. A crashing chord, dealt by the wife within, coincided with the ratification of a compact that did not appal Amy and from which she had nothing to fear since it neither menaced her peace, or that of anyone else.

CHAPTER XVII

THE social centre had shifted to the kitchen, because Amy was there. Most of the business of the house was brought to that place to be transacted. Lady Meadrow put on her new confection from Emil's to show Amy how it 'caught' her under the arms. Mrs. Bowman presented her knitting with a stitch to be picked up according to a new pattern for a comforter she was making for Mr. Johnson. Mr. Dand, before he left for Oldfort, had untied the presentation copy of Mr. Johnson's new book, and for several hours '*The Image of that Horror*' reposed negligently on the stop of the flour-bin, a whited sepulchre. Amy at last gave way to irritation, when Mrs. Dand came lumbering in, inviting her cook-housekeeper to be her confidant, and listen to what Amy considered her inadmissible complaints of the purely normal. Angrily Amy dismissed the thick-headed kitchen-maid who pottered about in the background longing for one of her own kidney to talk to, and not averse to listening to Mrs. Dand's plaintive recriminations. Amy did not choose that she should be corrupted and made cynical, by hearing one of the gentry rail against a woman's duty.

'Oh, Amy, if you only knew! I am so awfully tired of it all!'

'My dear woman, I do know, but don't you see that you are only wearing yourself out and enfeebling your powers of resistance, by chafing at what must be. You have started this, you can't stop it now. It is no good thumping your pillow when you can't sleep, or swearing

at the father of your baby. I don't consider it manners, myself!'

'I quite agree with you, but it does so soothe me to talk. Can't you go on making the pudding, which only occupies your hands, and give me your mind? It isn't that I don't love Jeremy, he is so devoted to me, and I know how badly he wants a son to carry on the name. But what annoys me is that men don't consider in the least the trouble they put us poor women to, just to realize their selfish wishes. Why should I bother and suffer and endanger my looks, I should like to know, all to bear an heir to the house of Dand? And then, if it is a boy, they will take him from me so much the sooner. I shall only have the management of him until he is seven or so, and then where am I? A cypher—nothing!'

'Have a girl, then!'

'I don't want either. I hate the whole business.'

'But it is so wrong that you should feel like this!' exclaimed Amy, with the virgin's revolt against the matron's questioning of the duties that were beyond her own ken. 'You ought to be proud you are permitted to form part of the great scheme of things.'—She rubbed flour into the butter with a will.—'It is our—your mission in life after all!'

'It is a shame to put an intellectual woman to such a base use.'

'She has no right to be intellectual, if it's going to prevent her being of use. After the butterfly period, which I would deny to no woman, whether it takes the shape of flirting and parties or cultivating her so-called intellect, I would have her settle down steadily to business, and not before she gets too old to do it properly, either. You have no right to want to get out of it. It's indecent—unfeminine. You have simply got to go down good

temperedly into the arena of discomfort and fight, once you let a man lead you there for your pleasure. It is the debt we women owe to Nature, and we have no right to cheat Nature, when we are put under an obligation to her.'

'But if Nature kills me, Amy?'

'She won't, if you fight fair. Don't be afraid. Good Heavens, don't I know how you feel! As if you had mounted a furious steed and must ride him to a finish —as if you had embarked on a ship, and were now in mid-ocean, bound to make a risky port without the power of turning round and putting back to safety—as if you were entering on a battle and the bugle had sounded, and you were in for it—in for it! That's the feeling that makes people fight, the devil-may-care mood! You must remember that you have been through it all before, and keep saying to yourself, "It's nothing! It's nothing!"'

'Well, really, Amy dear, it seems almost improper, your knowing all that. Or else it is that psychic people get hold of everything somehow, by intuition. I am psychic, too, they say. What was Jeremy talking to you so earnestly about last night in the garden? I played loud, so as to drown your words. I am not curious.'

'You fill me with remorse,' said Amy, with sudden sincerity.

'Why? Was your conversation so very compromising?' asked Mrs. Dand amiably, without meaning a word she said. Her vanity was a constant leash on suspicion.

'I don't know. I hardly said anything.'

'Yes, Jeremy does so like to monologue. All one has to do is just to give him cues and look understanding. I am not bad at it, you see he and I are in such utter sympathy. Only just now I find it a little difficult to play up, and take much interest in anything but myself!'

'Poor dear!' said Amy touched by the frank egotism of her avowal.

'But Jeremy mustn't be bored on any account, so I look to you and Mr. Johnson to supplement me. I hear steps outside, someone coming to bother you, Amy! It is too early for Jeremy! I'll fly!' She rose heavily and Amy thought the expression she used pathetic, 'I don't care for anyone to see me like this, though I daresay it's only one of the villagers.'

She departed by the kitchen door as her husband and Mr. Johnson came in from the garden.

'I have brought Johnson over to dine and sleep,' said Mr. Dand. 'Lured him with the promise of a good dinner—your last.'

'Nonsense, Jeremy. Dinners are no lure to me. I detest the whole wretched gormandizing business,' sighed Mr. Johnson. 'Why on earth are we plagued with this ridiculous machinery of mastication and assimilation? Why is our finer nature saddled forever with this wretched internal economy, blundering, tentative, and incoherent, like London, the despair of County Councillors, with its tangle of abortive streets, and atrophied channels of communication——'

'You would have God Almighty Haussmanize the body, eh, Johnson? No, no, leave us the romantic uncertainties of the cæcum, the grosser tragedy of the great intestine, that ought to go, like the House of Lords. And meantime why don't you help my little temporary cook to stir that heavy mess which you are to enjoy to-night—Castle Pudding, is it? Do you realize that she has to get all the rest of that flour in, without adding any more liquid, for the eggs are all used and there's no help for her?'

So saying, he left the kitchen, and Susan went out at the same time to pursue some really necessary avocation.

Amy did not send her away—she wished she could have stayed, for Mr. Johnson was squinting, a trick he had when moved at all. She put her floury hands knuckle-down on the table, cook fashion, and spoke first, a little in character, on purpose.

'I think you have chosen a very awkward day to come over, now, when we are short-handed. Just like a man!'

'Jeremy brought me.'

'Didn't I say, just like a man!'

'He was in a great hurry to get away earlier than usual!'

'Because we don't want him, I suppose.'

'Miss Stephens, your tone in speaking of him——'

'Too familiar, do you think?'

'You do seem to have acquired an extraordinary amount of influence over him since we last discussed this matter!'

'And you think it time to speak?'

'I wonder—is it?'

'Don't ask me. You must think it out for yourself.'

'You are blushing, Mise Stephens.'

'It is the heat of the fire.'

'But, Miss Stephens, you don't fully realize what it means—if I communicate what I know?'

'Perfectly.'

'But couldn't you arrest the process, and reassure me?'

'Pull in, do you mean—make him less comfortable?'

'You wilfully misunderstand me.'

'No, I don't. That vulgar material fact of all our existences is the whole secret of my influence, if you want to know. Since I have been here, things have gone admirably, from a domestic point of view. Mrs. Dand is a beautiful woman, but not a good manager, and her time has been occupied lately. Her husband does not know

why, but I have become essential to him. This only, Mr. Johnson, is the magic I have used.'

She smiled nervously, deprecating the opinion of the little man she despised and who secretly admired her. In her mind's eye she still saw the objective of all her strategy, the little child, sitting strapped in a high chair in its nursery upstairs with its mouth full of currant bun. . . .

'I am almost tempted to believe you!'

'You had better, that is if you care at all for your friend and his welfare. Of course I don't pretend to foresee the exact effect of your communication on him—he knows a good deal of it—but you evidently think that he will send me away at once and dispense with my services? Therefore I say, that you, as his friend, should hesitate before you upset things.'

'I have no right that I can see to sacrifice his happiness to his comfort. I suppose he can get another lady-help.'

'As you please,' said Amy, who looked very tired. 'And for the present I am, as you know, cook here, and I must ask you to go and leave me in undisturbed use of my own kitchen. You are going to stay on to dinner, I hear, and I suppose you want something to eat? That depends on me. I promise I won't put poison in your soup, but I must say that I think you are very unkind to a working woman, and are not even actuated in the step you are taking, by the best of motives.'

'What do you mean?' said Johnson, the yellow in his puny face suddenly over-ridden with red.

'I mean that I see you have the reputed feminine vice of jealousy very much developed. The truth is, Mr. Johnson, you resent my presence in this house, not so much on moral grounds, but because, naturally, it diminishes your own, which once was paramount. You felt the same about Sir Mervyn Dymond. I cut you out there. Oh, I know it!'

Her sudden access of mental fatigue had led her into a false move. Mr. Johnson rose, and with a dignity not habitual with him, said:

'I cannot allow you, Miss Stephens, to cast a doubt on my motives. What you say is not true.'

Amy interrupted, with sincerity: 'No, I know it isn't, but you do drive one so.'

'Believe,' he said, 'that I shall act in the matter as I think proper, and as my position as the tried friend of Jeremy Dand clearly entitles me to do. I consider nothing but his welfare, and you are obviously inimical to it. You are in truth a most dangerous and rusée woman, and I don't think better of you because I can't help admiring you.'

Mr. Johnson's involuntary compliment had no effect in checking the tears to which, in restrained fashion, however, Amy gave way when he had left the room.

The stupid kitchen-maid reappeared.

'Oh, Miss Stephens, don't cry. You to cry! Well, I never! I can't abide to see you cry. You that's always so kind. . . . !'

Amy cynically discounted some of Susan's palaver as symptomatic of the household's concurrence in Mr. Johnson's theory of undue influence and their belief in her power with 'the master.' She was shrewd, perhaps too shrewd, for the simple country girl's kindness rang true enough as, unsolicited, she brewed a cup of strong tea in haste, and brought it to Amy.

Mrs. Dand did not appear at table, but had a tray sent up to her room. Mr. Johnson was not one of the 'villagers,' and she thought it very selfish of her husband to bring him in at a time when she was so terribly at a discount. Besides, she did not feel quite so well this evening!

Amy's dinner was excellent, she was much too tired

to partake of it. She looked happier, though, for she had found time to spend half an hour in the nursery after she had dressed, embracing and playing with the pretty nursling, to whom she might so soon be called upon to bid farewell. She did not suppose Mr. Dand would keep her for a moment, if Mr. Johnson spoke. He liked her passably, but he believed in Johnson, and Johnson did not believe in her.

Would he speak? Would he have the heart to ruin her? Even though he dared to suppose she had not resisted Sir Mervyn, he surely realized that she had been quite good during her stay here. Here she had three chaperons, in Cavendish Square she could have done what she liked. She had slept alone on the same floor with the lady-killer. She had taken no care of her reputation. She was but a woman worker, not in society, it had seemed of no value to her at that time.

With all these precious issues at stake, however, Amy foolishly took no pains to modify the slightly mocking, too triumphant smile that moulded her clear-cut lips as Mr. Johnson held the door open for her to pass out last when dinner was over. She knew that the flush which tears and her day-long exposure to the kitchen fire had left on her cheeks was becoming. Mr. Dand's eyes had told her so, as she sat opposite him for the last hour. He had paid her some unusually marked attention, and she could not help being a little elated by it. These tokens of the present favour of the Sultan for the meanest of his handmaids were not lost on Mr. Johnson, who looked correspondingly depressed, and burdened by his secret. Amy feared and pitied him.

'Will he have the heart to give me away?' she thought, as the door closed on her and the rest of the trooping skirts. 'Full of my good dinner?'

CHAPTER XVIII

THE two men, left by themselves, settled into their chairs, and the host pushed the bottle along to Johnson with a friendliness that strengthened the latter in his resolve of protecting his friend from the machinations of the adventuress. His sense of proportion was almost neutralized by the melodramatic possibilities of the case he now felt called upon to deal with.

'You look nervous, Johnson—almost hectic. Have some more port?'

Johnson who was not a wine drinker, confusedly filled what he called a bumper. He wanted courage, like most conscientious but imaginative men.

'Dand, I want to talk to you—about the young lady who lives here as your wife's companion.'

'Miss Stephens? Fire away, I like talking about her.'

'Too well.'

'Why? She is surely a most interesting young woman?'

'Oh, nobody would deny that. I am interested in her myself—from a novelist's point of view.'

'Pity your view is so circumscribed. From any other she is worth study.'

'Dand, you are difficult to——'

'It is not particularly easy, I admit, to instil doubts, suspicions, scandals about people I like and value into my unwilling ear. That is what you are trying to do, isn't it? I think I know the tone——'

'And I know yours, when you disapprove. It is painful to me to affront it. But what am I to do? I owe all loyalty to you——'

'Not at all. You have my leave to betray me if you like. If it would make things pleasanter. Indeed, I expect it. I am prepared for every variety of broken faith.'

'In me, Jeremy?' The author looked genuinely distressed.

'In everyone, except perhaps in Amy. She is staunch to the little thin backbone.'

'I observe that you speak of her as a lover might.'

'But not as *I* might if I loved and were loved in return!' He bent his projecting black brows on Johnson, the mimic warrior who was affronting a giant of simplicity. 'Out with it, Johnson! I can see what you are driving at. Get on with your pretty tales against my poor little housekeeper. Here, let me fill your glass, you literary Judas, you!'

'Will you hear me, Jeremy? Shall we not talk straight as man to man?'

'Unfortunately, Johnson, I always talk to you as if you were a woman. As for expecting you to share my standards, I should as soon expect a strong sense of honour in a lobster, as in a literary man. I can't help it if you feel insulted, you couldn't write at all if you were stiff on certain subjects, you and your like have to keep an open mind.'

'Maybe?' replied Mr. Johnson placably, he was not so much poor spirited, as slavishly devoted to the man who was outraging his vanity. 'To you, Jeremy, with your semi-barbaric code, your crude and overbearing set of principles, derived, I suppose, from a historic ancestry, I can imagine that the economic and elastic standards that I work with must seem weak and inefficient. Still, I would have you know, that but for my very strong sense of personal honour, and what is due to myself, I should by now be married to this very Amy Stephens!'

His bomb failed. Mr. Dand took the announcement calmly.

'And so Amy Stephens was not due to you—what does that mean? That she refused you?'

'I did not ask her. I could not. She and I were fellow secretaries to the late Sir Mervyn Dymond, and lived in his house together, and were the first to find his body when he had committed suicide. It was at three o'clock in the morning and she was there alone with him. I was offered fifteen thousand pounds under his will if I would do as he wished and make her Mrs. Johnson.'

'It doesn't look much as if she had any hand in the making of that will! But I see the connection—I see the insinuation——' Mr. Dand toyed with one of the old German claret glasses he was proud of and broke it. 'Odd isn't it, Johnson, that all the women about me have a price set upon their heads? You knew about my daughter, did not you, and the painful matter of her taking off? Dyeonson was glad to take plain Dulce with fifty thousand. I paid that cheerfully to keep my Amy. She threatened to leave if I didn't make the young people happy. And now you tell me that you were offered fifteen thousand with Amy—a little less, but then she's the fairer woman, and yet you, you little yellow man, you jibbed at her!'

Both men rose. Both men were furious. Dand was pale. Johnson was yellow. He blurted out: 'You are not—Jeremy, I must say it—you are not treating me seriously?'

'Don't be angry, Johnson, but sit down. No, I am not treating you seriously, but in the only way I can and not break your head for you—as a person set up by the public to concern himself with the morals of private people, and encouraged to weave scandals about them——' He sat down, laying his hand palm downwards on the fragments

of broken glass that lay near his plate, with apparent complacency.

'I will ask you, Jeremy, once for all——' said the novelist, 'and then I shall have done my duty and can retire from this horrible wrangle—whether you did in effect know of Miss Stephens' connection with that notorious man, and the construction that was put on it?'

'I will only tell you, Johnson, in reply, that Miss Stephens actually left my service in Paris to go into his, and that I put my own construction on that act, as indeed on every other. Will you have more port? No? Then we will join the ladies.'

'One word more, Dand. You are rushing full tilt on your own ruin!'

His voice rose to a squeak as the door of the room was opened by his impatient host, unexpectant of further controversy.

'Quiet, quiet!' said Dand, pushing him in again and holding the handle of the door. 'I say again, don't be the prey of a too fecund imagination. I beg your pardon. You are the best of fellows, Johnson, and it isn't your fault that you are an author—indeed you could have been nothing else. But you do seem to me to see everything through the spectacles of the court missionary at Bow Street. I have taken your little tiresome excursions into the police court in good part—you happen to have told me something, that I didn't know, and knowledge is power. Now I will tell you something and tell it you in your own way. Amy has not fallen in love with me, does not think of love in connection with me, has therefore no motive for breaking up my happy home. You know I am not the kind of man who batters at a woman's affections. I leave women alone, unless they meet me half-way. The reason I have not been able to accomplish Amy's ruin is this, that I have never

for one moment succeeded in touching her imagination—any more than you did, when you had the privilege of living for three months together in the house with her. Amy and I have been domesticated here for a year and a half—time to make a hole in a woman's heart, if one is ever going to do it. But women are only won through their d——d imaginations, you ought to know that. Amy has seen too much of me, from a domestic, unromantic point of view. The bloom is off me, through hard wear of cheque-signing and wage-paying and heavy-fathering. She loves my child, lucky little beggar! Hollo! What is the matter?'

For the door, that he had been holding to, instead of catching the hasp, while he finished his sentence, was pushed violently from the other side, and Amy's face appeared in the opening.

'Oh, Mr. Dand! Edith!'

'Yes! What?'

'The doctor's here. He called in. He expected it, it seems. He is attending to Lady Meadrow.'

'What's the matter with *her?*'

'Fainting or something! It's nothing, I think——'

'I'll come,' said the master of the house drily. 'Poor Edith, her mother wants to rob her of the honours of her own particular scene!'

CHAPTER XX

Amy loved a nursery, nursery low chairs, nursery high fenders and the hygienic absence of bibelots and heavy furniture stuffs that usually distinguishes an apartment consecrated to the use of the young. She would sit sometimes of an evening in this plain low ceiled room and think. She never dreamed. The patient fire, hedged in by its protecting rampart of dull wire and gleaming brass, the bare boards of the floor, strewn with a homely litter of toys, soothed her with absence of teasing decoration. There is often a sense of repose to be found in the neighbourhood of young animals, washed, fed, and assuaged. The great St. Bernard and the little Erinna were always quiet and peaceable after tea.

Mr. Dand, when he could get away from his work in time, never failed to come to the nursery, expecting to find the woman whom he had set up as goddess of the hearth, in her place, prepared to soothe and solace. He was seldom disappointed. He could, every evening, if he cared to do so, learn the trivial household news of the day from Amy, who held the ends, as it were, of all the domestic tapes, and could reel them off for him, lightly, merrily, giving to the few *contretemps* that occurred under her rule, all their effect of humour by way of minimizing them.

Mrs. Dand, lying on the sofa, in her boudoir, with her advanced novel, agreeably stupefied with the scent of the many flowers with which she chose to fill her room—'I think they have souls, don't you?' she would say—did not always know when her husband had returned. He did not intend her to do so, until rested and smoothed down by

half an hour with the pale, sympathetic companion, he would seek the handsome *exigeante* wife, submit to her fussy recriminations and conventional archnesses, and present her with the obligatory book or spray of rare flowers, or box of sweetmeats that he was now careful to bring her nearly every day from Oldfort. Edith noisily claimed to be so remembered. He was to show by gifts of this sort 'that he had been thinking of her during office hours,' which he emphatically had not, or of Amy either. A hurried dart into a grocers' or a florists' or a stationers' last thing before he started for home did the trick, and pacified his wife. Amy, had she filled that position, would have had more sense than to entertain such an absurd notion of his marital duty. The maiden knew that men must work and women may, if they like, weep, and remember the palmy days of courtship!

Mr. Dand never brought Amy anything. She had all—she had his love. He had never given her a present, not even a book, yet Amy was a great reader. She was not very kind to books and had the illiterate habit of turning down corners to mark her place. This practice disgusted Mr. Johnson, applied to the rare and recherché volumes in Case G, which Amy, like himself, was made free of.

She did not in the least appreciate Baudelaire and Casanova. It never occurred to her innocence that in allowing these masterpieces of morbid literature to be lent to her, she was giving possible detractors an opportunity of saying that Jeremy Dand was corrupting her mind.

But Mr. Johnson, who might have been spiteful enough to say so, took very little notice of her. Mrs. Dand often rallied him in her heavy handed fashion for neglecting Amy. She was bent on bringing them together. But he came less and less to Swarland. Amy pretended to suspect

some attraction at Oldfort, and pleased Edith by chaffing him about it.

She did not fear him: she feared no one now. She assumed she could read people's thoughts easily, and she read his in this way. He thought that the new baby, and the husband's gratitude to the wife for producing it, had finally anchored Jeremy Dand to domesticity. Her own pernicious charm was effectually neutralized by the long desired son and heir.

Life was established on a perfectly correct and desirable footing. Amy felt happy and at ease as she sat one coldish afternoon in the summer by the side of the tiny fire which the north-country servant thought fit to keep up in the nursery grate. Little Erinna was playing with her Scripture bricks at a dignified and independent distance from her dear Amy. She was getting old now. But the dog whose life Amy had saved—though not its figure, for its rheumatic crippled legs spread out on both sides like a spatch-cocked chicken and always would—lay asleep on the least bit of the gown of his protectress that it could collect. It was not proud, but then, it was younger than Erinna.

A towel hung on the rail of the fender, and reflected its downy whiteness on the young girl's cheek. She was less pale than she used to be—a white rose that some cunning chemist had been trying to colour artificially. The chemist was ease, mental equilibrium, if not happiness. Though Amy was stouter, handsomer, she looked older. The habit of constant authority, the drag of responsibility, procured that inevitable alteration in her. A mission in life necessarily ages. The lazy arch of beauty is apt to disappear from the mouth that habitually domineers, albeit beneficially. Amy's lips were straighter, more like a bow than an arch. Her eyes still preserved their inwardness. Peo-

ple called her sly. The pose was not attractive; no woman would have consciously adopted it. It meant that the young woman, exposed continually to the chances of attack, fenced in but by bluff and bravado, refused to allow the enemy points. She knew she could not afford to give these explicit indicators free play and while gaining piquancy or beauty, risk to lose a good situation. Hers was the face of a fighter, hard, sharp, disingenuous, pathetic and fascinating.

Jeremy Dand admired her, but in spite of himself. The full-blown orchid-like beauty of Edith was the type he had preferred and still preferred. He remarked, to-day, grudgingly, as he came in and threw himself into a chair:

'You are getting quite a fine woman, Amy!'

'Am I stout?'

'You are like a nice, soft, grey cat, before a fire, palpitating with heat and comfort. My cat. My Amy.'

'Sh—h!'

'Deep in her bricks! . . . I remember you, when you first came here, a poor little discredited adventuress, all your *moyens* discredited, with eyes like some lean hungry dog. Somebody had kicked you. You were under the weather. And if it were not that I am acting up to my principles, making no trouble for you, exacting no love toll, there you would be again.'

Amy made another warning gesture in the direction of the child.

'All right. I will be careful to use long words. Here they are. Can you understand them? You and I, Amy, have been wise enough to abstain from the obvious, which is also the normal, and instead of taking the usual way out of the awkward hole into which we had got ourselves, we have hit on the best plan of it all—to stay in it! Not many a pair of lovers could have hammered out such a

clean solution of the problem as we have. As *I* have, that is, you have merely had the sense to fall in with my view quietly. That's your share. It is not difficult for you, for you are so nearly passionless, you have as it were no traitor in the citadel. I hope this is vague and veiled enough for the tender youth at our feet?'

'Not so very,' said Amy, apprehensively.

'Well, but about your own feelings! Let me hear.'

Amy laughed. 'Do you really want confirmation of your easy assumptions? Go on, it saves trouble. You say my state of mind is so and so, what is the use of contradicting you? You would never believe me. And a man always says a woman is cold, when he can't get her to flirt with him.'

'Brutal, but convincing. Sometimes, dear Amy, you talk like a 'bus-driver. But please let me go on thinking you cold, your physically correct, and mentally rakish, attitude is a necessary condition of our alliance. You are suggestive, not blatant; enticing, but not manœuvring. Go on like this. Be careful to leave me in doubt, don't excite my male arrogance, don't plunge me into despair, amuse me, but don't stimulate me, and all goes well.'

'You know,' said Amy, with apparent want of consecutiveness. 'I always think it looks shady when two persons who live in the same house think it necessary to resort to paper—to corresponding?'

'Don't call it corresponding. You did not answer.'

'Why should I? It seems to me that I have plenty of—that one has every opportunity of saying anything one wants to say, *viva voce*.'

'Yes, but in a houseful of women like that over which I have the honour to preside, and which you lighten with your presence, one is never positively sure that one will be free from interruption. One cannot take measures to secure

it, of course. That would thoroughly flutter the dove cote. And I am a man who likes to finish his sentences.'

'You might leave that to Mr. Johnson,' Amy observed.

'But surely it is quite simple for you. You have only got to destroy them after you have read them.'

'I destroyed it before I had read it,' said Amy.

'Why?'

'Somebody came into the room when I was reading it, and I put it straight on the fire.'

'In the fire.'

'Yes, but this was literally on the fire. The wind came down the chimney and took it and blew it up and out at the top, I suppose, for I never saw any more of it.'

'It probably went over the country to Oldfort or Blois. I don't suppose anybody there would understand it. I asked you a question.'

'What sort of question?'

'An impertinent question—one I dare not ask you verbally, lest you think me inquisitive. A question whose answer I have sometimes very deeply at heart. Just now, my dear, as I look at you, I don't care, I am able to keep down the jealous savage in me and take you as you are, as I expect you to take *me*.'

'But I don't take you, please remember,' she said gently.

'No, you sheer off at once, you scent disloyalty to another woman a mile away! I don't believe that you have any principles, Amy, any rule of conduct, except one, your duty to your neighbour, and a woman's neighbour is always another woman.'

'Very true. They call that virtue refusing to "poach" in the great world. I don't think one has any right to interfere with vested interests,' She indicated Erinna. 'And the person who has pegged out a claim first and enl-

tivated it, though it's only a claim, should be left alone. But I own that there doesn't seem to be any particular reason why two persons who have elected to be each other's supreme interest——'

'What a way to describe falling in love!'

'Why *will* you dot the i's? Well, I say I don't see why they shouldn't pool that interest and take bravely their chance——'

'Chance of what?'

'Of pulling it off. Of being happy or unhappy together.'

'When you speak so, it makes me want to ask you that question verbally.'

'Ask it then,' she said boldly, but with some internal tremors. She was like a hedgehog, afraid that someone is going to touch its bristles. Men never would let well alone. Here in this house her aim was to avoid personalities, to escape compliments, to evade analysis, and grounds for introspection, but her zest for casuistry was constantly leading her off the safe platform of generalities.

'No, it has nothing to do with me, after all. A detail, unworthy of you and of me. The truth about something not very vital, a mean pre-occupation of mine. We are not on those terms and never shall be. Besides, you are you, with all that it took to make you——. Here's Nurse, come up from her tea! I must go and change.'

The nice fat woman was trembling all over.

'What's the matter, Janie Summerbell?' asked Amy kindly.

'Miss Erin, put that box of bricks of yourn away in the cupboard,' said Janie Summerbell, prudently—the cupboard was at the other end of the room. 'Well, we all like you, Miss, all except that Cockney cat that looks after the boy, you know who I mean, and she's been telling us that

she got something you'd be fair glad to have, Miss Amy, a bit of paper, says she——'

'Did she show it you?'

'No, Miss Amy, couldn't get it from her nohow. It's a letter written by the master, seemingly!'

'Who to?'

'She wouldn't tell us, the brazened creature! She had it in the front of her dress, and she kept crackling it at us all tea time. My word, I'd have liked to tear it off her wizened body, that would I, and Susan and Bessy Andrews too. We're all o' your side, Miss Amy, and we don't none on us care a brass farden what you've been and gone and done, not if you was as black as that coal, we shouldn't go against you!'

'Thank you, Janie, but I have done nothing, and I am not black. Don't you take any notice. These sort of threats never mean anything but spite. Say no more about it, or she will think she has frightened me and will be coming blackmailing me! I must be off to dress now.'

Amy talked too intimately to servants and she forgot that the innocent country girl would not be likely to know the meaning of the ugly word, which had stayed over with her from the old life.

Only an hour ago she was congratulating herself on having left that life pleasantly behind, Mr. Johnson the one witness of it, pacified and innocuous.

Now it was all back again! A compromising letter, servants' whispers, servants' condolences, all the materials of a horrid local scandal, and poor innocent Amy Stephens in the midst of it, the heroine.

She knew she was innocent, technically of course, but how inconceivably foolish she had been! And therefore not innocent, for in her eyes, folly was the worst of crimes. She had been weak, flirtatious, commonplace. She had

allowed this crank, this queer fascinating man, in whose house she lived, to drag her by silken ropes of satisfied self-love into an equivocal position, untenable, indefensible, in the eyes of the non-elect of the spirit at any rate. Who, that heard it, and they would all hear, would be able to grasp the significance of the extraordinary ultra-mundane terms on which these two persons had chosen to base their intercourse? Their alliance would be set down as an ordinary vulgar flirtation—or worse a guilty intrigue—and no one would realize, except herself, that vanity, not love, had been its mainspring as far as she was concerned.

Jeremy Dand had pampered her starved self-esteem just as he had fostered her physical health and encouraged her to take tonics and flesh foods. He had given her consideration, he had given her sympathy and he had insisted on throwing love in, an unconsidered quantity.

She had tacitly—but only tacitly, so as not to offend him—declined the love, but she had accepted the consideration and the sympathy. She was an hungered and she ate, of the delightful food of intellectual community. 'I got it all on false pretences,' she thought. 'Cad that I am!'

She had never loved him and she felt nothing but anger towards him now. It was his fault that this bomb had burst into the midst of their peace and quietness. Her own carelessness had been the fuse, but that was all. Why had he insisted on writing to her, in spite of her strict discountenancing of any of the paraphernalia of intrigue between them? Man-like, he had inconsiderately gone his own way in one of those vital trifles which wreck peace and stability far more surely than the big risks that lovers take in fear and trembling.

She was not fatuous enough to imagine that Jeremy Dand had acted thus imprudently because he cared for her

as much as he said, or even thought that he did. The material facts of his existence were against anything of the kind. His particular mode of life could not but paralyze the springs of feeling. Accidental, fleeting emotions alone could touch him. She saw how it was.

She was a woman on the spot. She was fairly pretty, and not unamusing. He had noticed her, why not, she supplied a wholesome interlude to the main interest of his life? He grouped her with other ameliorations of his state, with change of air, a charming concomitant of his Saturday to Monday. But he was a miser in grain, he liked money for its own sake, he enjoyed collecting it and seasoning its squalid, brassy taste with the pleasure of the chase. To this ignoble end he was willing to spend the greater moiety of his days in a stuffy office in a smoky city, among dapper clerks and superintendents and business men, while his eyes, of beauty unfulfilled, rested on the staring columns of soulless ledgers, and his ears were assailed continually with the unmusical shriek of railway trains passing to and fro almost under his windows. What a stereotyped life! His affairs of the heart, whatever they were, must be got through in the few hours of the day absolved from business, allotted to repose and relaxation in the country.

He literally had not time to love. Amy, unique among women, realized the tendency of the age to Americanize even the tender passion. The old, thorough-going, exacting, dallying form of mental exercise must mend its pace nowadays or be left out of the list of amusements. By all the laws of romance, a hero of a novel should not work for his bread, or divide his attention in any way. But the amatory crises of the lover of to-day, their depth and intensity, can be determined merely by the amount of energy left over from the day's demand. A brain that has

dictated several dozen of typewritten communiqués, sent replies to a hundred or so of terse telegrams, is apt to look on love letters merely as the personal form of correspondence that it is obligatory to indict by hand and with diminished tension. Jeremy Dand's office held him prisoner strictly till six o'clock. Short shrift then for the services of the heart, and its needs, in the devitalized hours succeeding.

Edith Dand had never grasped this fact. She was a young, old-fashioned woman. She always contrived to suggest by her manner, if not by her speeches, that she expected great things of her husband, leisurely combinations of sentiment, calm appreciations of delicate shades, and grapplings with delicate situations that she actually strove to create for him. 'One must never let a man go to sleep!' she was known to have said. Thus on principle she prodded him up continually with unexpected assertions of femininity, she even permitted herself to be arch! He took refuge in the sullen good humour, the brutal impartiality of attitude towards demonstrations of all kinds which had become natural to him.

'A man cannot live in the house with three women without growing pachydermatous!'

The peace was kept. Only Amy realized that by the time the master of the house returned home at day-fall, a gentle slack piece of run-down mechanism, he wanted no immediate winding up. He was all unfit for amatory treasons, plots and stratagems, he was feebly inclined to play at everything, including the game of passion. Amy soothed and charmed him with her placability, her passivity, the result, had he but troubled himself to discover, of the sheer paleness of her feeling for him or any man, and of her very determined avoidance of the shoals into which even her slender amount of vanity might lead her.

She had been circumspect with the greatest ease. She took it as the guarantee of her immunity from amorous infection. Mr. Dand was her friend and benefactor. The arrangement was his, not hers, but she did not deny to herself that the innocent intrigue had amused her.

But she had wanted no nonsense of love letters. Not a particle of her entity connived with him, or rose up and justified him in this act of supreme and unnecessary folly.

It was going to cost her a home.

Amy was thoroughly annoyed both with herself and him. Men are always selfish and careless, but she, the woman, farseeing, prudent, what had she been doing? Why had she allowed herself to be lulled into a sense of false security by Jeremy Dand, who was a good actor and who had assured her continually that it was all right. It was not all right. It never could be all right to ally oneself with another woman's husband, even on the most moderate terms. These platonic arrangements between men and women were never worth while and always came to grief. Why, in the name of her own dear-bought wisdom, had she let herself be caught thus, lazily philandering, leading a double life in the interests of a passion that did not even exist, gyrating round and round a sort of Humbert safe, empty, in spite of the man's easy assumptions, of all amorous securities.

They did not love each other. Jeremy Dand would not care to marry her even if the famous incriminating letter should supply valid grounds for a suit to be brought by Edith Dand. Moreover, Amy knew well enough that Mrs. Dand would not, even in that unlikely case, have the heart to part from her husband. She would not even think of applying for a divorce. She loved him too much, and she believed too strongly in herself, and her power to chase the image of another from his heart. Womanlike, she

would insist on his throwing Amy over, and having removed the partner of his folly, would at once apply herself, with supreme force of vanity and patience, to annihilating all traces of the influence of her rival.

Dand would be obliged to let her go. The man always gives way in such cases. Their friendship—his declared love even—would count as nothing. She would be paid her wages in full—and perhaps a little over—and then driven forth, away from the child, prohibited from all further communication with the thing she cared for most in the world!

She dressed, and went down to dinner.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Cockney nurse approached Edith Dand, as that lady, in pursuance of her scheme of long-winded and elegant recovery, lay, booked, and flowered, and scented, on the sofa in her luxurious bedroom, with its double door and small ante-chamber between, that isolated her from the rest of the house as if she had been a favourite Sultana.

The nurse was that pitiful compromise, by way of being a lady. Her face was warped and twisted out of all simplicity by adherence to supposed fashionable standards, and deference to a gentility strangely at odds with the customary abuses of the trade.

'Excuse me, Miss—I beg pardon, Madam, but you do look so ridic'lously young!—I found this paper caught in the upper twigs of the privet-bush by the garden door.'

'What—whose is it?'

'It has no particular beginning, Mrs. Dand, but I can see the expression "Dear Amy," about half way down, which leads me to suppose it is a letter——'

'Dear Amy? Well, you must give her letter back to Miss Stephens, then!' Edith Dand said, in tones of disappointment.

'I think you ought to see it first, Mrs. Dand.'

'I don't read other people's letters.'

'One isn't quite sure it is a letter, Mrs. Dand.'

'Well, read a teeny bit out to me, and I'll judge. It can't be anything important. Begin just anywhere. It is to Erinna probably. Or perhaps—I didn't think Amy had a lover here?' Her thoughts flew to Mr. Johnson and she smiled knowingly.

The nurse cleared her throat and began, her small eyes scintillating with the consciousness of devastating knowledge.

'*I am quite good, dear Amy, but I cannot help having my thoughts. Sometimes as I sit by you on that long garden seat that you have banished me to the very other end of, I take to watching you. You look like a white, long-stemmed flower that if a man were to clutch and crush to him, he would simply break and render of no avail. What would you do if I kissed you? Would you shut your eyes or screw them up, as you always do when you are trying something difficult or disagreeable? You are attractive in your unconsciousness of appeal, so weakly, unknowingly feminine that I who have vowed to let you grow on, quietly, reputably, cleanly in your Artemis-like grace and calm I suddenly find myself descending to the sties and slums of a man's secret mind and there I am, basely wondering if you are deceiving me, and do actually hold the key to all knowledge? Why is your speech so open, and your glance so private—so elusive? Perhaps, beloved, you are not so much Artemis as Alcmena? That old Jupiter of a Sir Mervyn——*'

Mrs. Dand stopped her ears theatrically.

'You needn't read any more, Nurse, it's a disgusting letter, whoever wrote it! Let me look at it. I may know the handwriting?'

She did recognize it. She fell back on her cushions with aggravated violence. 'Brandy!' she murmured, automatically, and drank it with the fierce concentration of the habitual abstainer. Then she raised her head proudly.

'Put that letter into an envelope and address it to Miss Stephens.'

The woman did so.

'Now bring me my child.'

The nurse flew from the room, and Edith Dand lay back on her satin pillows and murmured:

'The tragedy of my life! I am left alone with the tragedy of my life!'

She said no more aloud, but mentally repeated the tragic ringing sentence a third time. It was like a raft that she clung to in this shipwreck of her vanity.

Here it was at last! Her husband's infidelity. She had not expected it, yet she had awaited it long, like the old lady her burglar. She had been buoyed up by her intense conviction of its impracticability, as the householder relies on his bolts and bars against the villainous centre bit. And at last it was here.

She must grapple with it. Enfeebled by illness, she must do the best that could be done, for herself and her husband. But it was very hard. For she was by way of loving the monster that threatened her peace. When the slimy creature raised its head, it bore the features of Amy, her whilom good angel, Amy, whose strange enigmatic personality had become an indispensable part of her surroundings. In truth she did not know how to be angry with Amy, the villain, the supplanter, the destroyer.

Such big words hardly suited Amy. Amy was too mean, too humble, little more than a servant after all. Edith began to feel she was doing her too much honour. Why, she had only been got into the house in the beginning as a sop to the first wife's spoilt daughter, whom it was the step-mother's interest to propitiate in easy ways. Then when Dulce married, they had foolishly kept Amy on, they had not quite liked to turn the poor girl adrift, and there was no denying that she *was* useful. Mrs. Dand blamed herself for becoming so familiar with an insinuating middle-class young woman, with no references, no connections, but with her way to make, her bread to butter,

and her passions to gratify. It was doubtless part of Amy's plan from the very first that the mistress of the house should become intimate with her, it made it so much easier for her to flirt with the master. The blind matron had stupidly fallen in with the maid's plan.

No, on the whole, Edith fancied that Amy was too cold to care for flirtation for its own sake. It was her craving for power that had led her into error. She was a manager born, a martinet. From the storeroom to the library, every department of the household must sooner or later submit and come within the circle of her control. It was merely in pursuance of the strongly implanted grabbing instinct that she had raised her eyes and attempted Jeremy's love. Jeremy was far too important, and too nice to be let alone. Then she had been caught in her own toils, for Jeremy had conquered, and not fought. He never really did make love, with effort like other men, but relied solely on his fascination, the surest, safest way. Edith hardly knew how she herself came to be his wife, he had never actually proposed, but had just signified his willingness that marriage should be talked of between them. But it had seemed inevitable, the moment he had condescended to give the matter his attention.

Amy, like everyone else, had been attracted by the splendid male, and had not rested till she had practised on his affability and got him to flirt with her and write her letters like this! The kind of letter implied the kind of woman. A sly creature, who never did look anyone fairly in the face! Those wretched sidelong glances out of a pair of quite mediocre eyes, that did not bear looking into! A low predatory type of flirt, a woman with no spirituality in her nature, in spite of her mouth, which gave her, perhaps, a better character than she possessed. Inherited, probably, and soon to grow coarse!

'Yes, I can disentangle it all now,' the wife mused, drying her eyes. 'My poor dear Jeremy! One must not forget that he is a man and not a disembodied spirit. He is of course subject to a man's horrid passions that we women need know nothing about. Amy answers to his lower nature. She has simply allowed him to make her the outlet of it. For I am convinced that he never would have allowed himself to write me a letter of that description even in the exciting days when he was courting me. Such a disgusting production that I could not allow the nurse, who seems a decent, respectable woman, to go on with it! Bringing in Sir Mervyn too, my horror! Jeremy knows I won't stand any allusion to him from mamma or anybody. No nice woman could permit herself to receive such a letter! Men will write them, but there is no need for us to encourage that dreadful side——'

She had unconsciously begun to rehearse her speech to Amy, her great speech. She must of course speak to Amy most seriously, poor girl, before she sent her away; and read her such a lecture on social purity and the task of all good women in furthering it, as Amy would never forget. She must give her some hints of conduct that would be useful to her in her next place. She would descend into the depths of materialism, she would wallow there for Amy's good. The pure to the impure.

Amy would probably, in consequence of kind management, take a turn for the better, and do very well in some one else's house. She was certainly all right so far as the sordid details of the ménage were concerned. That was the worst of it! Mrs. Dand realized that she was going to dismiss, on moral grounds, the very best housekeeper a woman had ever had. . . . Very awkward! . . . One suffered for the right! . . . Should she wait and look round for another housekeeper first? That would be

practical, but immoral. It would never do to have her about the house even another month. No, one must not allow personal considerations to influence one. One must be strong.

She lay back languidly. It was hard that this duty should fall on her, the weakest, who had but lately gone through a physical crisis of the first importance, and produced a living son.

She had just given a child to this man who was spending his time in writing queer, unusual, morbid love letters without beginning, or end, to another woman. Ah, Jeremy had not chosen his moment well! Surely, mere considerations of gratitude for the discomfort and even peril she had undergone in his interests—a son and heir!—might have prevailed on him to forego his low pleasures for a season while his poor wife was suffering for his sake! But men refuse to think of these things, he had simply been worried by her danger, not touched by her devotion, and he had been so much and unavoidably left to himself at the time.

That was it! Poor Jeremy! It was her enforced absence from his side and inevitable withdrawal from their mutual pursuits that had been the cause of his backsliding.

She had hated having to be cross with Jeremy and was delighted to have hit upon this excuse for him. She had only one person left to be angry with now. On that person must be poured all the vials of her wrath, for it was plain enough how it had happened!

Naturally, she had not been with Jeremy as much as usual. She could not potter about the estate with him, or take an interest in his collections, or share long walks in the country. He had, in consequence, been bored to death and had solaced himself with naughtiness, like a child who

teases the dog or plays with beggar-children, or empties watering pots on its pinafore, when it is left to play alone. He had fallen back on the society of Amy, the only other woman about the place who was under sixty.

Amy had not been slow to see her advantage. She had at once pressed it and had succeeded in gaining an influence over him. Only a temporary influence, that a wife could blow away with a breath, once she was about again! He could hardly admire Amy, plain long-nosed Amy, without a tithe of Edith's beauty, beauty that he had always taken a pride in decking and fostering. He bought her lovely jewellery and insisted on her wearing it with the right dresses, himself indicating the harmonies in every case. He had never given Amy jewellery. Amy's neck was always bare, and she hadn't a thing, that even looked like a present. Here Mrs. Dand remembered a compliment that her mother's lover, old Sir Mervyn Dymond—though she hated him; she had remembered his words—had once paid her: 'Child, with that neck and figure you should rule empires!'

Well, she had not lost that figure, although she had borne two children. She had made some sacrifices of her immediate comfort to its preservation, even lately . . . One must consider one's body, the fair temple of the soul and suffer for it if need be. Some women are reckless and let their figures go, but it should not be counted unto them for righteousness. Beauty has duties to itself. . . .

Her thoughts were drifting. She was doing too much thinking. That was wrong, just now. There was no hurry. Amy had been with them four years and there was no harm done. And a great deal of good. All the horrid housekeeping taken off her hands. She would soon be downstairs again and Amy's little game put an end to. Was

that an old letter the nurse had read? How long had it been hanging in the privet-bush? It was astonishing how lazy, how unenterprising she felt. . . .

She looked at her chronometer. It was six o'clock. She heard the scrunching of the wheels of her husband's motor on the gravel below her window. He did not generally come round to the front? No matter, he would be in her room in a few seconds now. He always came straight up. . . .

Her warrior had returned, safe from the scuffle and fight of the day's work, he had won heroically through the long hours of moral squalor in the city office, situated deep in the dusty heart of Oldfort. People called Jeremy the King of Oldfort. He held the strings of everything, such confidence did his chief, rich, old Lord Gould, repose in his capable right hand man. His wife realized only partially what the business day of her husband's was like. The exceedingly workable view of it had been well rubbed into his women-kind by Dand himself. They all knew that he fully expected to return day after day, as it were, to a peaceful haven, a nest of singing birds. The ladies were to get all their quarrelling over before the toot of his horn, as he entered the park gates half a mile away, could be heard. Edith was quite aware that she was expected to be very kind to her foredone knight of the money bags, to unbuckle his armour, and metaphorically take his weary head in her lap. She had never failed to fill her post adequately. Then why give her an understudy? She had no need of one, she was perfectly equal to the position of soft, sympathetic, untroublesome chatelaine.

Jeremy was a very good-tempered man, if you gave him his own way and she had always done so. He always let her be nice to him and he was nice to her. She had the softest hands in the world, he said, hands that were mes-

meric and could almost cure a headache. He paid her many a measured compliment. He was *aux petits soins* always—an admirable husband. Once jar him however, and no one could tell what he might do. He had a bad temper, for all he was so gentle. Must she worry him the moment he came up, his heart bounding with pleasure at seeing her again, with complaints of his housekeeper?

But he did not come up? The motor had trundled off to the garage long ago, or else she would have supposed he was talking to the man about it? It was late, too, he had been detained at the office? . . . All the more reason to make haste to her? . . .

She began vaguely to realize what Amy had realized long ago, that for Jeremy, the wifedom that she represented, and domesticity in general, remained in utter abeyance till six o'clock, and that curtain lectures were a luxury which she must learn to forego, as they had gone completely out of fashion in the stress of modern business existence. Tiresomely as circumstances had contrived to arrange themselves, it would have been sheer cruelty on a wife's part to insist on articulating her difficulties or even her woes in the face of his fatigue. Edith had not, until to-day, had any very important matters to discuss with Jeremy, but she saw plainly enough that she would not be able to 'get at him' to-night. All he wanted of her at this hour, all he would tolerate just now were relays of trifling conversational items, a little music, and mild reference to his children and other fads. She must wait till next day! . . .

Next day he would be off again early, before she was up, and so it would go on, till the cycle of the week was completed. Then Sunday, the day of rest, more fads and soft conversation! He thus was enabled to evade every situation as it occurred. The office was a fine derivative; the

man who used it in this sense was in no danger of losing his temper, and could well afford to be urbane!

Looking back she saw that this mutual attitude of theirs explained a great deal, it explained why they had been able to get through eight years of married life without a quarrel. She had never thought of this before.

What a time Jeremy was in coming to her! She began to fret and fume. He had been in the house for quite half-an-hour. Where did he go when he came in? To Amy? Was it possible?

Then she must really take some notice of it? Things could not go on like this. She must consult her mother whose whole life had been, regrettably, one long series of *divorces manquées*. Lady Meadrow had tried hard to get rid of her first husband but in vain, the poor eager lady had had to wait till he died to marry Sir Flaxley Meadrow. Her experience might be of some service at this juncture, though of course, Edith was not thinking of divorcing Jeremy. There was the personage whom they all called Jeremy's mother, to be informed, but hardly consulted—of course she would take Jeremy's side—if not Amy's. So might Edith's own mother—no—no—her duty was clearly towards her own daughter, and she had plenty of good feeling, if a little haphazard in distribution.

Someone knocked. Tremulously Edith bade 'Come in!' and the door opened, revealing Amy, carrying the new baby, kindly, but gingerly, because she did not love it.

'Oh Amy, you!' was all the mother could say.

'Why not me?'

'I don't know. Everything seems to come at once. I heard Jeremy below! Hours ago. Why don't you run down and welcome him?'

Amy might have realized that something was wrong,

only that in spite of the volume of fateful meaning she tried to throw into it, Edith's voice would behave in the most natural manner.

'He comes home quite regularly every day,' said Amy, 'so I see no reason why I should treat him as if he had come back from Paris. It would be just the same if it were Vienna or St. Petersburg. I am quite hardened to travellers returned in this house. Here, take it.' She held out the baby. 'Nurse came to me and said you had asked for it.'

'So I do. *It* indeed! I want *him* to kiss. He is all I have now. Why didn't Brown bring him herself?'

'She seemed anxious that I should have an early opportunity of dropping it. Why do you want to make an emotional excuse of the child?' she asked scornfully, standing by the bed. 'You'll squeeze the life out of the poor little wretch if you don't take care.'

'A mother's love can never hurt her child, Amy, do you think?'

'I don't believe in kissing, as you know.'

'Oh, don't you!' said Edith Dand who had not the courage of her spite, and spoke in so low a tone that Amy failed to catch the words.

'Is there anything else I can do for you?' she asked, at the door.

'Kindly tell my mother, Lady Meadrow, that I want her.'

'Yes. Your mother, Lady Meadrow, is busy writing her memoirs, on the very best sermon paper.'

'Amy, I really cannot jest with you to-day. My head——'

She had meant to say heart, but something in her throat seemed to get directly in the way of any approach to an explanation with Amy. Besides she had settled not to

speak yet. She had a certain dread of loss of power, of the dissolution of strength that would be entailed by the dissipation of her knowledge. She took a childish pleasure in the temporary husbanding of her treasures of accusation, and the withholding of a statement that, when she chose to make the public free of it, could not but produce effects which might considerably alter the lives and the policy of all concerned.

CHAPTER XXII

Lady Meadrow in spite of her unknowable age was really a pretty thing to look at. She had from her childhood enjoyed that ash-coloured hair that is never supposed to turn grey, and this well-known fact, oft reiterated by her, lent her mildly conceived and well executed wig conviction. She had kept her figure passably, and showed it, for she had been lying down, and wore a French peignoir of the unbraced variety, that is such a sartorial pitfall to the advanced in years. No one managed impromptu, flapping, effects better than this heroine of a hundred courts and she knew it, and used them freely.

'Amy said you wanted me, dear, so I left off my before dinner sleep and came straight to you.'

'Yes, I must speak to you, mamma. Have you your salts?'

'Why, dear? Aren't you feeling well?'

'No, mamma, it is for yourself. I have lived with this thing for nearly an hour now. I am hardened.'

'Good gracious! What thing? Has it anything to do with me?'

'No, mamma, with your unhappy daughter alone.'

When a woman takes to speaking of herself in the third person, the most matter-of-fact listener realizes that the true tragic note is being struck, and Lady Meadrow, who had, as she said, sat on the boiler all her life, was prepared for any unexpected development arising from men's insurgent passions and woman's attitude towards them. She sat down on the bed and folded her lace flaps round her.

'Speak, darling!'

'Mamma, of course you have a lot of experience——'

'Yes, dear, I have lived and loved, *Io son stato molto amata,* as poor Maria Stuarda said on the block. Oh, how Ristori said the words! I sometimes sigh for those days, when all Europe was ringing with my name. I was made for lovers broils and entanglements. But dear, what is it? You must not let me run on. To have been loved by Sir Mervyn Dymond alone—don't let me see you making a face, Edith!—was a liberal education. No, I don't believe you will find me at fault on any point connected with what is after all the motor spring of our poor feminine existence. Your difficulty is of course, Man. Well, well, with that tricksy sex it is a case of bear and forbear; let them have their silly little way. We get ours in the end. Be a comrade to them—never worry or ask questions. Never say "When are you coming again?" or "You never come to see me!" How often one hears that wrecking phrase in drawing-rooms, indeed in every room—never spoken, however, by a man's woman!'

'Now, mamma, you're off on your hobby, but I wasn't asking for an essay on Male Management, it isn't a case of that with me, I can manage Jeremy all right under proper normal conditions, but——!'

'What is it, dear? You frighten me.'

'Only this, a mere trifle to you, I suppose. I have lost my husband's love. A woman has stolen it from me.'

'Nonsense, dear. Love is never stolen—not in the lump—I mean the store of it is so inexhaustible. It's like those leaf palms, you divide them when they get too big for the pot, don't you know? What you do mean is that Rémy has been flirting.'

'Of course he has been "flirting," I wouldn't pay her the compliment of calling it more.'

'You did call it more just now. Who is the creature?'

'My paid companion—isn't it degrading? Amy!'

'Amy!'

'Mamma, don't look so flabbergasted! Amy's the obvious person surely? All the other servants are hideous.'

'Yes, you take care of that. Poor Rémy!'

'But, I suppose, mamma, you don't expect me to stand it? That doesn't enter into your programme of indulgence, does it?'

'It's a great pity in every way. Poor Rémy!'

'Poor Rémy again! And I'm to bear and forbear, I suppose?'

'Well, I hope so,' said Lady Meadrow feebly, seeing her way to a joke. 'It is better surely that you should than Amy!'

'What do you mean, mamma? Oh, I see. How disgusting! Not a subject to jest about. You simply spoil men, mamma. But I happen to have a pretty high standard of morality and I can't tolerate a Hagar in the house as you seem to suggest. Amy must go.'

'Amy go!' said the old lady looking truly discomposed.

'Well of course. I can't do with her false face meeting me at every turn.'

'Her false face, is it? Its bonny enough. And I'm sure I don't know what we shall do without her clever fingers.'

'Mamma, I'm ashamed of you. You are only thinking of yourself.'

'And of you, dear, and your husband. Consider what a difference Amy's coming has brought about?'

'My maid can curl your wig,' said Edith, unkindly.

'And cut Phoebe Bowman's corns, oh, yes! But who will keep the house for us all?'

'I will.'

'You did before she came. It was not a success. House-

keeping virtues don't run in my blood evidently. Remember, dear, that on several occasions during that truly awful period I was obliged to tell you I did not think it would do—our all living together. I am not fussy or over-particular, I am sure, but a certain amount of comfort I must have, and since Amy came, I have had it. Consequently no complaints. But if you were to carry out your impossible threat——?'

'What would you do, mamma?'

'I should have to go and live somewhere else, and I am sure that Phoebe Bowman would follow my example. Of course I don't know, dear, if our united contributions to the upkeep of the establishment make any sensible difference? Rémy may be a great deal better off than he admits, but there it is! I should have to omit my humble contribution to the housekeeping and remove myself. That is if you pigheadedly chose to part with the very best housekeeper anyone ever had.'

'I don't say anything against her housekeeping, mamma. It's excellent and keeps you all well and good tempered, and as you say, before, everybody was so cross and gouty, that it was awful! I like it myself; as you also say, housekeeping doesn't seem to run in the family, but—there is something higher to think of, isn't there? In the interests of abstract morality I am afraid poor Amy ought to go?'

'I don't see why you can't leave morality in the abstract?' whined Lady Meadrow. 'I always did, I know. And anyhow, expediency in a house like this, comes before morality. And by the way what evidence have you got against our little friend? Servants' tittle-tattle? Oh, I have suffered from that myself. My dear, they will say anything, if only you pay them for it. Their evidence is hardly accepted now even in the divorce court, where it is generally all there is. My old parlour maid, that I had

had over twelve years, got up, as perky as you please and swore to lies about me! Flaxley paid her. It was, of course, the slight admixture of truth about them that made them so damning—I mean damaging. That was the bother of it. I myself had paid her well to hold her tongue, too, but nothing binds them when once publicity sets in. They love excitement, like the rest of us, and indeed at one time when all Europe was ringing with their mistress's name, it was enough to upset them. And I daresay these of yours have magnified trifles into something serious. Poor Amy is so very careless of appearances, she is so above-board that she doesn't realize that she has enemies, and the way Rémy depends on her and trusts her is enough to make the other servants jealous.'

'That's just it. So demoralizing! She likes to show off her power to them. I won't have it. All the servants take her orders more than mine, and it's absurd to talk of her having enemies. The boy's nurse, perhaps, isn't so entirely under her thumb as the others, and even she doesn't say that she has *seen* anything! She merely brought me a letter. It is there in that bureau. I have not really looked at it. You had better. It is from Jeremy to her, that's all I know.'

'What are you suggesting, Edith? I certainly cannot bring myself to read any letter of Rémy's to another woman. He would get to know that I had, and he would never forgive me. And talking of letters, aren't you aware what nonsense clever people get writing when they once have a pen in their hands? It runs away with them. Why, Rémy has written the silliest letters to me, letters that I burnt at once lest they should make mischief. How tiresome of Amy to leave his about and so unfair to a man! Oh, I wouldn't let a letter affect me if I were you. Deeds, not words. Depend upon it, if there was anything to hide

they would be more careful. But unsatisfied lovers are apt to spread themselves on paper. Old Sir Mervyn never so much as put pen to ink to write to me, he had no need——'

'You needn't brag about it, mamma. It was a pretty disgraceful state of things, and quite ruined my young life. I am not going to have my boy grow up under a cloud. I must put my foot down. If I don't, I see exactly what will happen. You will all encourage Amy and pat her on the back and tell her to go on flirting with my husband. Of course I quite agree with you that it is only flirtation, but you must admit that it is not very pleasant for a loving wife—for I can truly say I am that—to have to think that she can't suffice to her husband, even in details! Why are you laughing, mamma?'

'Because you are so funny, dear.'

'I don't see how I can be funny? I am not feeling funny, I assure you.'

'No, but you are so oddly naïve, for a daughter of mine.'

'I can't help being your daughter,' said Mrs. Dand, who was now seriously offended, 'and I have always thought, mamma, that you took all these things too lightly. You got so used to the divorce court. You see things through a quite perverted lens. I think perhaps it will be best if I manage my own affairs, they aren't at all in your line I see. I daresay I am old-fashioned. It is impossible to keep pace with old people nowadays. They have got so fast. Thank God, I have some principles left. It is time you dressed, isn't it? I shall not appear at dinner. I think I've got a temperature.'

CHAPTER XXIII

'Is that you, Jeremy's mother?' Edith asked next day in a wilfully feeble voice, responding to a tap at her bedroom door. She lay in bed, sipping her morning tea. The baby had been with her and had just been taken away.

The old lady walked in, her moon-face of calmest pink and white framed in the close, tightly-frilled bonnet which she reserved for bedroom use. The lace strings of it were firmly tied under her chin. Her white silk wadded bed-gown with a silken rope round the place where her waist used to be, was properly and neatly fastened everywhere where a fastening could possibly operate. She did not approve of the flamboyant style of bedroom dressing, but sought the becoming nevertheless. Like the greater part of her clothing a touch of cerulean blue was introduced into it. She considered pink meretricious and left that colour to Lady Meadrow. Her soft grey hair was evenly parted on her broad white brow, that two deep horizontal lines of reflection intersected. She had once kept pace with modern thought and read Darwin and Huxley. She had few other wrinkles. She stood now, a tall, not ungainly, but unyielding, figure at the foot of Edith Dand's bed, and looked down on her as the Pyramids might look down on the ages.

'Isabella Meadrow informs me, in her haphazard style, that you are meditating a folly,' said she. 'Will you allow an old woman to address you on the subject?'

'Oh, yes, certainly,' replied Edith Dand, raising herself a little on her pillows and looking touchingly frail and

weak beside the sturdy, firm-fleshed old woman at the foot of the bed. 'Only please sit down—you look so tall.'

Mrs. Bowman smiled and obeyed her daughter-in-law.

'It is very good of you to be willing to listen to me, for I do not myself believe in interference between man and wife. Only as my son himself is the delinquent, perhaps you will agree that I may take a personal interest in the readjustment of your relations.'

'Yes, Jeremy's mother. Only we have not quarrelled, as yet.'

'I am glad to hear it. Then you have not spoken to Amy yet either?'

'I am thinking it over. Indeed, I only want to do right.'

'I know you do, my poor child, but that is just where the difficulty lies. It is somewhat confusing in these modern days. The right is so much complicated with expediency. In my days issues were simpler. Now what with motors and electricity, stronger minds than ours may be pardoned for failing to see their way clear. But——' She paused, 'there is one sure guide——'

'I am sure you are sitting very uncomfortably,' said Edith, suddenly, seeing church talk ahead.

'I am very well, my dear. Let me continue. The dear Dean used to say—I hear him now—"God is love" . . . Now, if indeed all our actions are to be the outcome—are dictated by love, then it is pretty certain that we shall do nothing violent, nothing thoughtless, nothing unnecessary——'

'Then you want me to keep Amy too?' the wife blurted out.

The old woman raised her hand.

'Wait! I wish to consider this entirely from my son's

point of view. He is my son, and the son of the Dean of Blois. Erratic, full of ideas, as he may be, derived from the extraordinary and atheistical books he reads, but he is, all the same, fundamentally sound. The views he imbibed at his mother's knee are still with him. He is a man of honour as well as a clever man, and men of honour do not make love to inferiors living under their wife's protection. Establish that, and you clear away the serious part of the aspersion that has been cast upon him. He is not likely to forget what is due to himself.'

'I never thought it was more than a flirtation,' Mrs. Dand said humbly.

'Hardly that, I should say. The fruit of a servant's nasty mind. Really, you should not listen to servants.'

'I don't.'

'Very right. Well, then, about your attitude in this matter.'

'May I not choose that for myself, please, Jeremy's mother?'

'You will do that in any case, Edith, for you are an obstinate little puss, and always were. But after I have spoken, I hope that you will see reason to modify your ideas a little? Of course your views are sure to be a little uncompromising, as a result of your youth—you own to twenty-seven, don't you? I would not seek to probe you farther. Anyhow, you are a mere chit to me, who have lived——'

Edith Dand smiled quietly into the embroidered sheets at the parallelism discoverable in the substance of the two curtain lectures she had undergone in the last twenty-four hours. How these two wicked old women preached! But she was patient enough. Edith was always what is called 'good' with old people. She lay quite still, while Mrs. Bowman proceeded to burrow into the recesses of her past, and

to give her the resultant worldly wisdom accruing therefrom, as Lady Meadrow had done the night before.

'Perhaps, dear, you would not be inclined to believe it, but I was accounted an excessively good-looking woman when I was young.'

'I can *quite* believe it,' the daughter-in-law answered, politely.

'I have not altogether kept my figure, one cannot expect that at seventy-five, though Isabella Meadrow hopes to do so. But it tended at its best to the Junoesque—it was of the commanding order. The poet Browning once said of me that I was grandiose. Well, Edith, my love, let me tell you, with all the physical gifts with which my Maker had been pleased to endow me, I should no more have thought of attempting in word or deed to—how shall I say?—to circumscribe the area of the dear Dean's glances or to limit in any way the scope of his attentions than I should have thought of flying. He had to be free. I knew he would not rove long.'

'But come back like a boomerang,' said Edith laughing. She was really quite amused. 'But, confess, Jeremy's mother, that you sometimes gave the partners of his crime a good talking to in the drawing-room, after he had kissed them in the study.'

'Edith, my love, you must not permit yourself to be coarse. It never went as far as you suggest, though the Dean was an extremely handsome man, one of the most fascinating men of his day. And as for lecturing the poor vapid creatures who imagined they could supplant me, I sometimes did assure them in so many words that it was no good, that the dear Dean's affections were fast anchored in me, that he was faithful as a rock to the true faith. I was young and heedless then, but I was not above taking counsel and advice. I took all my difficulties to a

very wise man, the future master of St. Frithiof's—he was Canon of Blois at that time. A most reliable man, my mainstay in those days——'

'And your husband afterwards.'

'True. He admired me from the very beginning. He shared the feelings of the whole staff of the cathedral, canons, clergy, singing men even. There was one curly-haired bass who became quite excessive. Then, when we went to Oxford, I can remember that in chapel every Sunday an unanimous prayer for me went up from a hundred throats. One and all invoked heaven on the behalf of gracious Phoebe Bowman——'

'And was there never any scandal about it?'

'Scandal—and me!' Mrs. Bowman drew herself up loftily. 'No. Neither as Dean's lady, nor master's wife did any hint of blame arise. My ermine was unspecked. How should it? There was nothing behind-hand about anything. My life was open and as straight as my parting and that was an achievement, let me tell you, in those days.'

'Your parting is like a Roman road now. Do go on, Jeremy's mother.'

'My dear child, I am telling you all this, not to amuse you, though I daresay it is very interesting, but to substantiate my claim to know men and manners. It is as a woman of the great world that I venture to advise you, and this is my theory. I have observed that no man, not even the best of them, can dispense with *variety* in the blessings of female companionship. Like bees, they are apt to fly from flower to flower, seeking an impossible combination, sipping intellectual union from the one, admiration and flattery from another, and perhaps severe practical advice from the third. But having exhausted the particular virtue of any one of these, they fly back to the

one woman they truly love and admire, the stand-by, the ne-plus-ultra, the one that has got them and no mistake about it!'

'There is a good deal in what you say,' said the One who had got Jeremy Dand.

'And so what need you care, that a little pale, unimportant creature, having happened to realize his ideal, not of beauty or intellect, but of efficiency, should usurp a corner of your province? Anybody fairly smart and clever has a great power, I grant you, but even then, it is merely man's lower comfort-loving nature she holds the reins of. It is she, indeed, who makes it possible for men to give all their devotion to high ideal qualities, and worship beauty in peace and comfort. *"A perfect woman nobly planned. To warn*—or is it warm?—*to comfort and command"*—the kitchen! Wordsworth's words always seem to me to express Amy. Jeremy can't help appreciating Amy's qualities, as we all do. He sees that she is a born organizer, a master-mind at management of a house, supremely tactful, never putting herself forward except to be of use, neat, tidy, and dexterous.'

The old lady grew enthusiastic. Edith looked sour.

'There is nothing she can't do, from cooking a dinner and nailing up a creeper, to driving a motor and massaging me. Where the little thing learnt it all puzzles me! But think how nice it is for Jeremy, away the whole day, as he is, to be able to feel sure that everything will go on wheels while he is gone, that his mother is comfortable in her old age, that whatever befalls, Amy is there, that if his child cuts herself, Amy can practise first aid and prevent its having lockjaw! And how the child adores her! Amy is so good to it, she is never out of the nursery or far beyond call. She sees to its food and its clothes, both are admirably adapted. The nurse says she herself flies

to Amy for everything and need never worry you with questions of management or nursery politics. Amy is just like a mother to little Erinna—— What's the matter? You are crying!'

For such maternal and housekeeping instincts as Edith Dand possessed were now insulted and wounded beyond endurance. Her sobs terrified old Mrs. Bowman, who flapped her hands about helplessly and pattered about the room looking for salts or ether.

'Don't, don't, dear, don't give way so, it is so bad for you. Let me ring for someone.'

'You dare!'

'But what have I done? Good heavens! You will cry yourself ill! Silly child! Come, come, dearie, you must not spoil your sweet eyes!'

'All you've left me!'

'Well, isn't it enough? Poor Amy, no one ever admires her eyes—or her mouth either.'

'Jeremy does.'

'I, his mother, assure you he doesn't. She isn't his type at all. He said so only the other day.'

'Bluff!'

'And that her nose was too long for beauty.'

'Teha! You say that my child loves her better than me.'

'Did I? What an old fool I am! It was just a way of speaking! I wanted to make you——'

'Oh, I know what you wanted to do. You were simply praising up all you know the woman who has insulted me so that I should not dismiss her from my establishment. You adore her—you all adore her! I cannot, cannot bear it!'

'Only as a housekeeper, dear, I appreciate her. And that is what we all feel about her! She has absolutely

no personal charm; she is simply a good manager, that's all!'

'So if I send her away, you will go too?'

'I am sorry, to say, dear, that I shall have no other option than to do so! But one hopes, dear Edith, that it won't come to that. I hope my tiresome sermonizing——'

'Both your sermonizings! Mamma has been at me too. I think you have all gone mad, or it is I. I certainly never thought when I took Amy into my house that she would turn out such a cockatrice!'

'And pray, what is that queer beast?'

'It's what Amy is, an adventuress. And she has sent you all mad. Yes, an out-and-out adventuress! Where did she come from? Where did Jeremy pick her up? Suddenly she appeared in our midst. Jeremy procured her. I believe it has all been a plant from the very beginning. A low woman out of the streets!'

'No one ever saw an adventuress, of the type I suppose you mean,' said Mrs. Bowman drily, 'with fewer personal advantages. Adventuress! A little pale starved-looking girl like that! At least she was when she first came here. I took to her at once and I hope I know what's what? Poor little thing! Trust my discrimination, Edith, and calm yourself. I am quite shocked at you. But I hope that what I have said——'

'Say the threats you have hurled at me!'

'I hope my threat and your mother's threat of leaving—since you will describe them so offensively—will have the effect of discouraging you in your plan of making a stupid fuss, and induce you to look it over this time for all our sakes. Did not I hear Jeremy inviting you to go over to Paris with him on Tuesday? Why not accept? And get some new things. You like clothes—procure yourself some distraction. And meantime I will have a talk with Amy

and suggest prudence—more discretion. I know she has only been indiscreet.'

Mrs. Dand, tear-stained, shaken with sobs, had slid out of bed, and now stood up menacingly.

'No, Jeremy's mother, you won't do that! I have not yet decided what to do—not absolutely, though I am afraid it will not be what you want. But anyhow, if you or mamma get in front of me and breathe a word of this to Amy, she goes, and at once! . . . I hope I am still mistress of my own house!'

CHAPTER XXIV

Mrs. Dand took her first long walk next day and asked Amy to accompany her. Amy was pleased, and her eyes glistened. She had nearly recovered from her alarm of the other day, and this sudden act of condescension on Mrs. Dand's part clinched the matter and made everything safe. Nothing had come of the town nurse's threatened revelations. The creature now avoided her eye, and Janie Summerbell assured Amy that she had ceased from crackling papers and now took care to keep a civil tongue in her head.

'She knows she hasn't frightened us, Miss,' the simple girl averred. 'And she sees you going about the house as bold as ever, with your little bag full of papers in your hand, and the master giving you the key of the cellar, too. Anybody can see as you are not to be interfered with!'

It was true. Amy's credit in Mr. Dand's house had never been higher. She reigned supreme. She made lists, she handled money, she interviewed outside servants and gave them their orders, she even ordered Mr. Dand's clothes for him now, from his London tailors'.

The situation was at an end. Mr. Dand's letter had not been so incriminating after all, for the Cockney nurse had not thought it worth while to show it. All was well. Her spirits rose to becoming point. She had never in her life looked so handsome.

The two old ladies stood on the steps of the house to speed the two younger ones on their way. Most of their solicitude was for Amy, very little for the recent invalid.

'Good-bye! Get some roses in those pale cheeks,' cried Lady Meadrow.

'Have a nice walk, you need it, but mind and be back in time to do my foot,' called Mrs. Bowman.

'Oh, yes. Edith must not be out too long,' Amy assured them.

Edith was dull and calm, a little discontented-looking, as usual.

And as usual she walked fast, with her head a little bent down. Amy counselled more deliberation.

'You know there's no hurry. You must not overdo it.'

'Why do you bother about me?' said the wife.

'Why should I not?'

'It is just as if you cared about me.'

'I do.'

'Not a pin!'

'A brooch—a locket—a tiara—a great deal!'

'You *can't* care for me, or you——'

'Or I what?' said Amy. 'You may say what you like, but I think I do truly appreciate you. I consider you an awful brick, the best woman I have ever known and the most patient.'

'Yes, that I am,' said Edith violently.

'Because it must be rather trying, the whole arrangement, eh? Here am I, a mere outsider, taking on myself to boss your house for you, and you never get cross or order me out, but just sit still and look pretty.'

'Because if I did order you out,' replied Edith, as one in a dream of sincerity, 'I know that Jeremy would have you back again the next minute. You do it all so well, I don't deny that. No better than I could, only I have been ill and unable. . . . However, as soon as I get over this, I mean to assume the reins again.'

'Will you?'

'Shall you mind very much?' asked the other, bending a weakly inquisitorial gaze on her companion.

'Yes,' said Amy, frankly, 'I shall mind very much, although of course it is your right.'

'And you will help me, won't you?'

'I'll try. But I am afraid I shall not be able to work *with* you as well as I work *for* you. It isn't in my nature. I need a free hand to bring out all my capabilities.'

'And if it doesn't work, I suppose you'll go,' suggested Edith timorously.

'I suppose so.'

The vision of her two mothers and their recent threats dictated to the poor young woman her next appealing phrase.

'Oh, Amy, you *have* edged me out, haven't you?'

'It isn't my fault, is it?' replied Amy sadly. 'Sometimes I wish I had never come here!'

'No, it is my fault—and Jeremy's. He loves comfort. He has bad days when he wants everything nice! You fuss about him. I let you. I was wrong to be so confiding. How could I foresee that it would turn out so?'

'But,' protested Amy earnestly, 'it hasn't turned out so badly has it? Don't I give satisfaction? At least I have done you no harm, either to you or your house!'

'Truly, Amy, have you not? Oh, I must sit down!'

She felt that now she was reaching the kernel of the matter and her knees threatened to give way. There would be a scene. Edith mentally enjoyed and physically dreaded scenes. They gained the summit of a tree-set hill—a kind of half wild, half encouraged hangar. Just off the path stood a log hut that Mr. Dand had once designed and built, pergola-wise. At least it was not draughty. Amy bestowed her charge in the warmest corner and stood up in front of her. She could no longer blind herself to the

fact that all was not well in the state, and judged it well to speak and clinch matters.

'Yes,' she said gently, 'I can truly say that I have never done you an injury.'

'You sound sincere, but then you always do.'

'Because I always am.'

'Sincerity may be your pose,' said the other in vague reminiscence of some epigrammatic novel. 'But——'

'Out with it, dear!'

'Amy, don't attempt to terrorize me! You make me feel as if I could not say what has got to be said.'

'I can guess it.'

'Ah, can you? Then say it.'

'No, indeed. You must do your own dirty work. Accuse me, and I will answer you.'

'Amy—my husband—do you love him?'

'No, I do not, though I don't see what right you have to ask me such a question.'

'Then——' The wife did not seem able to bring herself to frame the words of the corollary. . . . She blurted it out at last. 'Does he——'

Amy finished her sentence calmly.

'Love me, eh? That is hardly a fair question, either. I can't be expected to answer it. Suppose you confine yourself to ascertainable facts. You can't assess love, and its sum total.'

'Well then, Amy, will you deny that he writes you love letters?'

'Oh, that's it, is it?'

Amy whistled.

'How can you take it like that?'

'Nervousness, pure nervousness. I beg your pardon. Have you the letter in your possession?'

'I have. Why?'

'Because I should like to read it. And I swear to you that it will be for the first time.'

'That can't be true.'

'It may sound strange,' said Amy gently and seriously and kindly; she had got her balance again. 'But it is so. The letter you hold was duly received by me, and never perused. As a matter of fact, it flew up the chimney in a piece.'

'What an extraordinary story!'

'True, nevertheless. So, as you have read the letter, and I have not, you had better hand it over, unless indeed, as you have taken the precaution of reading it, you think it would be bad for my morals!'

'It is not—it is——' Edith stuttered. The fine phrases of blame conceived awhile back in her spirit of rigorous Puritanism she now found it impossible to pronounce. 'The letter makes no difference.'

'Doesn't it though? You don't seem to think how nice it is for me to have an irresponsible sort of man damning me like that, without my knowledge or connivance. I knew the sort of letters he would write and that is why I put this one on the fire without reading it. I didn't ask him to write to me—in fact I asked him not to do so—most particularly. I consider that he has behaved very ill indeed, getting me into this stupid mess, just when I was going on so nicely and was so happy!'

'I can't help it if you were happy. You had no right to be while you were receiving letters like that.'

'That's right—women all the world over! It was your paragon wrote the letter, scold him! But you won't, no, you have only blame for me. Oh, how I do despise and detest women's way of going on! Unjust—unfair—uncharitable!' She fumed as she paced the narrow limits of the pergola.

'But my dear,' Mrs. Dand murmured with upturned chin, from her encompassing rugs. 'You don't seem to realize, do you, that a man doesn't as a rule address a woman so familiarly unless she has given him a right to do so.'

'You don't know your husband! He is bound by none of those tiresome laws of decency. He doesn't stick at anything, at least, so far as words go. I don't know what he said, but I call it striking at one in the dark, stabbing one in the back, letting one in for this sort of thing! I call it tactless—inconsiderate—but there, so he is! the most selfish man I know!'

'Hush! Hush! I cannot hear you speak so of poor dear Jeremy.' A smile broke over the wife's face. She was defending him, standing up for him! She was grateful to Amy for abandoning this wifely rôle to her and felt a queer slavish kindness for the little pale virago striding about the log hut. Then, her tedious righteousness came uppermost again, and she made a desperate appeal to the criminal, spurred on by visions of melodrama.

'Amy, can you look in my face—his wife's face—and tell me that Jeremy isn't your lover?'

'Yes, right in your face! He is not my lover, in any sense of the word that matters.'

'Why should you qualify? But I believe you, Amy. But can you swear that you haven't encouraged him to flirt with you?'

'Ah, I am not so sure about that. I haven't done wrong, but I have been very foolish, and it is all coming back on my own head. . . . You are a nice woman, and I'll trust you, and you must trust me. You can. I have never done you any harm or meant you any, on my honour. I've got honour, though I am not county and only a companion.'

She swooped like a blue swallow in her dark serge dress and sat down beside Mrs. Dand.

'I have never had your advantages, so how can you expect me to behave like a lady in this affair, or in any affair? But I can be honest and I will. We can talk as woman to woman, and discuss it quietly.'

'I don't quite see how I can discuss my husband with you,' said Edith stiffly.

Amy turned pale and rose. 'As you will,' she said sadly, 'I only know that I was quite willing to meet you, and make a clean breast of it and tell you the simple truth about him and me. But if you won't, you won't.'

'I didn't quite say I wouldn't.'

'Well, but you make it too difficult. You are so conventional in your vexation.'

'Vexation! A husband's love! One's whole life at stake!'

'Irritation, then. I refuse to take it seriously. I know I'm all right, and that is all that matters—for you. As for men, they may be all right, too, but it isn't the same. Mr. Dand is all right.'

'Am I to believe you?'

'You'd better, because I know. Out of my knowledge comes my great contempt, and my tolerance. Well——' She sat down, and Mrs. Dand made room for her on the seat, gave her a bit of shawl. 'What you want to know is where we are, your husband and I. I tell you, this is a rather horrid business, but it is by no means a hopeless one. I see daylight. It begins from this—you are quite persuaded now that I don't love him. It wasn't easy to persuade you, was it? Natural enough in a wife. You won't find it so difficult to believe that he doesn't love me, eh? Perhaps, he thinks he does? I daresay; it's a way men have, because they like it assumed that they can love a

dozen at once and have enough to go round and disappoint none of them, but as a matter of fact, he has never told me so in so many words.'

'He doesn't use the word love in the letter, I admit.'

'I am glad to hear it. Good for him! Let me see—how shall I describe the terms we are on? They are queer—everything's queer, but not in the least disturbing——'

The difficulty of explaining to Edith the complicated sophistries of her relations with Dand smote her and she decided to put the case simply, in material terms that Edith could not fail to comprehend.

'On my honour, he has never kissed me!'

The wife's eyes grew misty with relief. Returning confidence in Amy brought the happy tears into them. She whimpered:

'The only thing then, now, is, it hurts me so! My vanity, you will say. I say my love. I always thought I comprehended Jeremy and his moods so thoroughly, that our two minds jumped together. He never kept anything from me before. Indeed he did not need to tell me things, I divined them by the power of intense sympathy. And this affair between you sounds so queer, so unusual, so unlike anything else—so squalid, if you'll forgive the word——'

'I'll forgive anything, if you'll only forgive him.'

'Why do you care about my forgiving him, if you don't love him?' Edith asked, like a suspicious child.

'Because I don't choose that anyone should get abused and worried unnecessarily, if I can help it. And also when I am not cross with Mr. Dand—I always call him Mr. Dand if that's any comfort to you—I like him well enough.'

'How could you help liking him? Amy, what do you two talk about when you are together?'

'I can't tell you. . . . I forget.'

'Amy, if you are going to keep me in the dark like that I shall always be wondering——'

'Oh, good Lord! I couldn't stand that. You would wonder out loud. I had better go.'

'Go away? For good?'

'Yes. From here, to begin with. You will be catching cold in this damp old hut, let us get home.'

As they worked their way down the steep hill path where dead leaves crackled and Amy had to hold and ward off the impertinent branches from her face, Mrs. Dand was thinking urgently of the ire of her two mothers when they should be informed of the developments to which this walk from which they had hoped so much had led. Amy had threatened to go! Then they would remove their eight hundred a year each from the common fund and Jeremy would be wild, more angry even than over the loss of Amy. He cared more for his money than even Amy, so she fancied. She looked furtively at Amy every now and then. Amy looked determined and the hand she extended to the more delicate woman from time to time to help her over rough places, was cold and un-magnetic. She withdrew that helpful quality first thing, of course, thought Edith. Amy would consent to mesmerize her headaches away no more.

Amy on the other hand was considering how far she could go in her feint of leaving. She did not want to leave, but she was determined that it should be Mrs. Dand who implored her to stay. She would stay, for the sake of the child, if she could, and take the responsibility of keeping Mr. Dand in order. . . . Her lips were tight-set as they gained the open. She waited obstinately for Edith Dand to speak.

She had made up her mind that the younger woman would hold out no further than the gate at the end of the

home meadow, and she was right. Edith was desperately afraid of meeting the eye of Mrs. Bowman and Lady Meadrow and inviting them to consider a house that knew not Amy's ministrations as their home in the future. They would refuse. She knew it. She could not manage to get rid of Amy this time. She spoke, her throat was dry. She suffered, more than she had suffered when the nurse had first read her those few compromising sentences. This was real, this was earnest!

'Do you really mean, Amy, that you want to leave us?'

'Yes, had I not better?'

'You are going to say that I have sent you away?'

'I will, if you like.'

'But I don't send you away. It is a matter entirely for you to decide.'

'Frankly, then, I think I ought to go.'

'Ought, but not must,' said Edith. 'It won't be *my* doing. I don't drive you.'

'No, my own sense of decency drives me.'

'But if you didn't really ever flirt with my husband and never, never mean to again . . . I should have to stipulate that, . . . Or let him flirt either?'

'Oh, it's all too difficult,' said Amy, sighing.

'No, I still think it could be arranged.'

'Candidly, Edith, I need a rest. It is better for me to go.'

'But what will you do?'

'I don't know. More mischief, I suppose, take to evil courses——'

'Oh, Amy, don't threaten to go to the bad like Dawes, I should never forgive myself. Nor would Jeremy.'

'Oh, he——'

'Really, Amy, he is very fond of you. I know it. I don't mind. I was excited just now. And if you threaten

to leave us he will be so cross, he will sulk for days, for years, perhaps?'

'I daresay I'm useful.'

'Now you are bitter.'

'I have everything to make me so.'

'Poor girl! I daresay it is trying for you, living in the same house with such a fascinating man. I am not hard on you, it is you who are hard on yourself——'

They were nearing the house. Amy's eye anxiously scanned the front of it. . . .

'Say no more,' she said hastily, 'here come both the old ladies out to meet you!'

'Oh, I am so dreadfully afraid of them!' Mrs. Dand murmured. 'They interfere so, and are so *exigeante*. One would think to listen to them, that I was a bad housekeeper. You indulge all their fads. It is they who complicate the situation——'

'Otherwise I might go, mightn't I?'

'No, I personally don't like parting with you, Amy, little cat that you are, you have become second nature to me. Deplorable, isn't it?—that a woman should be so poor spirited. Don't take too much advantage of it, that's all! Go on standing between me and them, as you have done. You have such a way with them—and everybody! I suppose it's called charm, yet you haven't any regular looks, everyone says. We often discuss you. The old ladies and I? Don't imagine anything escapes two cats!—'

'Three.'

'Amy, no one ever said I was spiteful! But now promise me, dear, you'll do nothing before I see you again? Come to my room just before dinner, will you?'

Amy promised, with apparent unwillingness.

CHAPTER XXV

An hour later, having refreshed herself with the ministrations of her true backer in this ring, the little child, Amy entered that holy of holies, Mrs. Dand's room. Edith came rushing up to her, the winged sleeves of her peignoir inflated with air, her countenance beaming with ingenuous fervour. Fervently she kissed Amy on both cheeks.

'Then you'll stay, Amy?' she panted.

'I will, but on one condition only.'

'How tiresome of you to make conditions, Amy! But I don't care, I have had both the mothers in, and the trouble I have had to put them off! They both thought you looked upset when we got back to the house.'

'I was cold,' said Amy. 'Didn't you say that?'

'Yes, for so was I. Indeed I have only just fought off the beginnings of a severe chill. Those damp woods, and our conversation was a little trying. I can't help it, I always do start a temperature at the least hint of a scene. I am a regular barometer of emotion. I can't think how you keep so stolid, Amy? However, all's well that ends well—you will stay with us?'

'I have not told you the condition yet.'

'Be quick and say it. It is sure to be granted.'

'It is this, that you keep all this to yourself, and don't make a scene or a temperature either.'

'I'll tell no one but Jeremy.'

'You are not to tell him.'

'I must.'

'Then I go.'

'Amy, surely—it is not for you to dictate what I shall tell my husband or not. We are one. How could I meet him with such a secret between us?'

'Oh, you little fool!'

'But, Amy,' said Edith, who responded to the use of the verbal lash better than any woman Amy had ever known, 'what else can I do?'

'Do you really want me to tell you?'

'Yes, if only out of curiosity.'

'Go on as usual, and if you make any change in your conduct at all, let it be to be fonder and more loving.'

'It would be the height of indecency, with you in the house.'

'Well then, I go. I said so at first.'

'Cat!'

'Perhaps.'

'You know I can't do without you.'

'You say you can't, dear. But I think it means that you go in mortal fear of the old ladies.'

'Yes, that is the horrid truth. Because you happen to suit them, they threaten to leave the house if I let you go. They have said it in so many words. What a naïve fool I am to tell you this?'

'You won't lose by your naïvete with me, at any rate. Well, I'm sorry you have told them, but it can't be helped. It won't matter. I'll work it this way—beat them at their own weapons—swear to leave if they let on. Then I've got them safe on toast.'

'Oh, yes, you have got us all into the hollow of your hand. You are a sort of witch—a spirit.'

'Possibly, but I am benign, not malignant. I'll be a good Brownie to you if you will fulfil my conditions.'

'Well, give your orders. I am to behave as if nothing had happened.'

'Precisely.'

'And everybody in the house knowing what my husband is kept in ignorance of.'

'I won't stay, unless.'

'Then that settles it. I shall lie down. I am tired—the emotions of this awful day—before you go explain what do you want me to do next?'

'Well,' said Amy, 'so as to soften off the rough edges a bit, why don't you go to Paris with Mr. Dand for a week? I heard him offering to take you.'

'No good. The autumn fashions aren't out!'

'Well, make him buy you a jewel. Jewellers' shops we have always with us. Go and dine about a lot. Make it a second honeymoon.'

'You advise that, Amy—you! Then I really believe you don't love him!'

'Sweet innocent!' muttered Amy under her breath.

'I'll do it!' said Edith, her eyes flashing. 'I'll take a line.'

'Yes, do!' exclaimed Amy violently. 'Take a line, a different line to the one the average woman would take. Don't be commonplace. Be plucky, be unprejudiced, be wonderful. Submerge your human vanity. I don't mean your physical vanity for that's useful. I mean the part that's wounded by all this. Believe me, in the whole scheme of things, it's nothing—a flash in the pan. Likes and dislikes, loves and unloves, what are they all, a hundred years—nay a few months hence? But if you do go in for that sort of thing, play the game, learn the rules, do it properly. You are pretty, awfully pretty, far prettier than I am. And he is a man after all. You can appeal to a side of the men that I have never appealed to in him, or in anybody. If I had had that kind of physical magnetism, do you think he wouldn't have made love

to me in the usual manner, in a week? I've been here a year and a half and am still respectable. If he cared about a woman from that point of view he would brace his whole intelligence to get her, he would stick at nothing, and throw prejudices and opposition to the winds at once. Do you think I don't know? . . . That I should be talking to you like this! . . .'

'Yes, I was wondering when it would strike you,' said Edith coldly.

'Madam, I am teaching you the game, the pretty cruel game of men and women. Must play it, or go into the ditch. Mine is true wisdom—thoughts struck from the avil of a hard life. I make you a handsome present of them, because I am sorry for you.'

'I do not allow people to be sorry for me,' said Edith. 'But I see something in your plan—great merits—it's so new, isn't it? Did any woman ever, before?—And you mean well at any rate. I'll try it, and see what comes of it, and God prosper me!'

'And who is going to prosper me, I wonder?' thought Amy Stephens, as, very wearily, she made her way to her own room. Mr. Johnson was coming to dinner. Everyone was on the *qui vive!* What a volcano she was living on! Was it worth the fight? She thought as she languidly mended the lace on her dress, and passed a large-toothed comb through her thick springing hair, that she was heartily tired of it all and would prefer to give up her tenure of the overlordship of Swarland and all it implied.

What kept her here? What stout iron girder of a motive supported the delicate fabric of her resolve? Love for another woman's child? Not, of course, love for another woman's husband? Oh, no!

Once let two perfectly modest unemotional women come to wrangle verbally over a man, or contest him, even for

form's sake, and allow themselves to discuss the sum of his affections as a treasure to be preserved by the one or wrested away by the other, and it is likely that the sex interest in one or both of them will be aroused and stimulated. Passions dormant or frozen in more than lunar cold may then revive and take a hand in the pretty quarrel. Mrs. Dand's rash handling of Amy's secret mind perhaps did precipitate the unwilling atoms, and cause them to fall together kaleidoscopically, in a pattern of love, real, or simulated? Amy was a good deal upset in the mental region, not at all her own confident self, as she extinguished the lights in her room, swished the train of her dress, that always did catch, round the curve described by the notched old door of her room, and set out down the corridor and the turret-like stair to join the party for dinner.

She was met in the lower hall and enmeshed in the embraces of two happy old ladies who knew that their precious digestions were entirely in Amy's hands and who had some reason to hope that Amy would be good, and amenable and not repudiate the helpless change. Mrs. Bowman limped a little. 'You are my staff,' she said gratefully to Amy and used her staff accordingly to go in to dinner with.

Lady Meadrow murmured:

'I've seen dear Edith, she looks splendid to-night. There is a kind of soft radiance about her. . . .'

'Her walk did her good then,' said Amy, who was conscious of her own aggravated pallor. Talk of scenes and temperatures! It was the hardy Amy, not the delicate Edith, who was the worse for their devastating talk. Mrs. Dand sailed in after the rest of the party, clinging, catlike, to her husband's arm. Amy had quite expected her to overdo the seducing process she herself had advised, but oddly enough, she felt a little faint, and her bread, that

she seized at once, on sitting down and began to eat mechanically, seemed as if it must choke her. Or was it her word of honour that she had given that very afternoon?

She, who had never known jealousy, was irritated by the sight of the formal siege her willing pupil laid to Jeremy Dand's errant affections. Edith exaggerated the part in her clumsy eagerness to secure them. It was obvious that she had dressed herself even more carefully than usual. Her white shoulders were skilfully veiled in transparent folds of pale grey chiffon like dim clouds about the brightness of the moon. Amy saw Jeremy Dand's glance, which nothing escaped, coldly appraising these matrimonial values. Mrs. Dand had an irritating way of sliding her long taper fingers round the margin of her decolletage. Nervousness, probably, a self-conscious need of adjustment, but to the other woman this complacent accentuation of that special form of appeal was insupportable.

'I am going with you, Jeremy, to Paris on Tuesday, did you know?' his wife announced suddenly.

'You refused before.'

'*Souvent femme varie.* I am going now, unless you refuse to take me.'

'I shall be delighted.'

'And you will take me to all the amusements, even if they're fast, won't you, Jeremy?'

'To anything wicked that's going.'

'And dine at the Café de Paris?'

'No, sup.'

'And you will have to pretend I am not your wife!'

'Very well. Shall I peel you a pear, Amy?'

'No, thank you. You may give me something to drink.'

'What will you have? Sherry? Port?'

She hesitated. . . .

'Give her Port!' said Mrs. Dand curtly. 'Are you not well, Amy?'

'Quite well. I am tired, that's all.'

'But she's turning quite white, Edith,' cried Lady Meadrow. 'I believe she's going to faint! Oh, my dear Amy——'

'Liver, probably,' Mrs. Dand remarked calmly, not rising from her seat. 'Suppose you go and lie down, Amy, in the drawing-room, for a bit. It is dark there. Perhaps it will pass off. Gouty vertigo! I have never had it, but I know the symptoms.'

Mr. Dand rose and held the door open for Amy to pass out. Amy took in the self-effacing droop of his shoulders and the mask of inexpressiveness he was careful to spread over his face, saw that he assumed the correct male attitude when confronted by grotesque feminine illness. Edith had made Amy ridiculous. It was the return blow that avenged the inequality of the combat of that afternoon. Amy felt that she never could forgive her, and she had just sent her away on a honeymoon with the man who henceforth was Amy's own concern, for she could no longer ignore the effects of propinquity, the chances of juxtaposition. It was an effect perhaps of gouty vertigo, but she suddenly saw the heavy ugly physiognomy of Jeremy Dand in a new light. He was a strong, powerful man of much importance, and he cared for her. . . . She could, and she would use the passion she had stirred in this odious woman's husband for all it was worth, a handsome weapon of retaliation that lay ready to her hand! . . .

She flung herself down on the sofa and lay quite still, recapitulating the terms of the deadly insult.

'Liver! . . . She may as well say Love as Liver. . . . So she shall!'

Presently the door of the room was opened wide, letting in a wide shaft of light from the hall. Mr. Dand came in carrying a full wine glass. Her mood partly changed and she realized what a rage had possessed her. It was over now. She did not care. Of course she would let him go away with his wife after all, and be happy with her if he could. . . .

He was coming cautiously towards her, and stumbling over a footstool, swore gently.

'Why on earth didn't you have a light?'

'Edith said I was to lie in the dark.'

He put the glass of wine down on Edith's silver table at her elbow, and the metallic tinkle of the odds and ends that he displaced irritated her. His hand closed on her ankle in its thin silk stocking, and she moved with a pettish jerk that annoyed him.

'I didn't seem able to find you in the dark? . . . Confound it all, it's the first time I have touched you!'

Amy burst into tears and Edith bustled in.

'Go out, Jeremy, and leave her to me. Don't you see she is hysterical?'

CHAPTER XXVI

'Amy, I insist on your staying in one room,' said Mrs. Dand next morning. She was making a domiciliary visit to her housekeeper before she rose. 'You have got a regular feverish attack, and I'll prescribe for you. Why do you turn your face to the wall like that?'

'Because I have had a letter that has upset me. Do leave me to myself, there's a good woman. I am quite willing to stay in my room till you go away—that's what you want, isn't it?—but I mean to get up on to my two legs this minute. I won't be doctored for nothing.'

'All right, please yourself. Perhaps it is as well that you and Jeremy shouldn't meet till after we come back from Paris. Then everything will be a little different, I hope. Only, Amy, that letter you speak of?—Is it from——'

'It is not from your husband. It is from no one you know—Dr. Pottinger.'

'No, I don't know a Dr. Pottinger. But perhaps you do?'

'Naturally, since I have had a letter from him.'

'I'll leave you, Amy. You seem in a disagreeable, carping sort of mood. Get up and sit by the fire. I won't come near you.'

'No, don't. Go and pack your trousseau for the honeymoon!'

'Very well,' said Mrs. Dand seriously. 'We leave by the nine o'clock to-morrow morning. You see how good I am, Amy. Taking your advice like a lamb!'

'Ah, yes, my advice! I had forgotten. Well, I hope it will pan out all right and as you expect. May Erinna come to me?'

'Yes, if you like. For half an hour.'

Amy got up, dressed and drew her sofa near the fire, in the little ante-room to her bedroom which was called her boudoir. Most rooms in the old part of the house opened out of each other; they were all convertible into boudoirs and dressing-rooms, as occasion served. She did not send for the child after all. She felt too miserable, and she would have a clear week of its company while the father and mother were in Paris. She was glad that she would not see Mr. Dand before he went, and hugged the notion, and read 'Plato' to calm herself. But she had counted without her host. About six o'clock in the evening she heard a firm knock at her door and knew that it was he.

'You can't come in—you really can't. Send a message. Say good-bye through the door.'

He opened the door. 'Nonsense! I am not going away without saying good-bye to you. You are on the sofa—you are all right. No—keep your feet up!'

For Amy, wild-eyed, haggard, and weak, had risen or rather jumped to a sitting posture. He put her feet up again and retreated to a distant armchair.

'Don't be so wild. You have absolutely nothing to fear from me, as you know well enough. What is this extraordinary development? You have avoided me for the whole day. Why?'

'I have been feeling ill. Edith told you last night. And I hear my mother's died in the asylum.'

She expected no expressions of sympathy. Mr. Dand never helped people to pamper the pathetic fallacy. He merely observed, 'Well, it can't be helped. You must take a good rest while we are away.'

'Good God! Rest!' exclaimed Amy involuntarily. She felt as if a window had been blown suddenly out. And she saw she had betrayed herself. He bent his brows on her.

His hands met and were clenched, unnoticed by her, for his voice was even enough. 'Do you mind our going, Amy?'

'Yes, I do mind "*our*" going,' she cried, with strange uncertain violence. 'You know what that means, so now go away, out of my room—please—please——!'

'I won't go out of your room. Why should I, because you have said that? But I promise to come no nearer, as an admission such as you made entitles me to do.'

'Yes? I know. I let go, I gave way, I am a muff. Everything's wrong—everything's false about me. I have given my word, and my word's worthless!'

'Word? Who to? Nonsense! You are taking it as if it was the marriage service, when foolish people dare to promise impossibilities. It's nothing, I tell you. A whiff of passion. You know. You had to know sometime or other. All women must. When I touched you last night, after Edith had excited you by her rudeness, you knew! You'll forget again. Your nature has betrayed you—temporarily. I told you it would. One can't be better or more heroic than one's self.'

'But it's only a mood, oh, say it's only a mood! I shall get out at the other side of it. I don't believe it is real, and if it is, it will make no difference to you, anyway, or to your people, that trust me. I shan't fail them. I haven't a soul left in the world to me now. You are all my family. Oh, I am so glad you are going away.'

'I shall come back,' he said gently.

'Yes, I hope so, but by that time I shall be no longer hysterical. I shall have taken long walks, and worked, and I shall have had your child to kiss and love——'

'You are like De Musset who kissed a child *pour donner à son coeur un peu d'innocence.*'

'I can't understand French.'

'No, you are not a thorough-paced adventuress at all.'

'That's right. Abuse me! Insult me! It does me good, it shows me that I do not really love you.'

'No, you don't really love me. I agree with you. This will pass with you, as it has passed with me. . . . We shall be able to continue living here, all of us, on the old terms that were so sweet—to me. You were my chosen companion, not my mistress. Anybody can be a man's mistress, but companions don't grow on every tree. And these rolling mists of sense that come down now and then and hide the mountaintop, will clear away and leave us in our good peace and serenity. Don't you think so?'

'You have settled it.'

'Yes, and according to the dictates of propriety, too. Charming! But it is no doing of mine. I am impartial —quite. I tell you, I never touch the pendulum. I obey circumstances. I am going off with my wife, on a second honeymoon, so she says, and I daresay it will be. I do not dislike her because I love you. That is not necessary. Once, conventionally speaking, she was everything to me. It isn't her fault, poor thing, that she isn't now. Neither is it yours. Don't think so. Enjoy yourself. You will. I am leaving you my child, whom I know you prefer to me, whatever you may say while this fit is on. Be as happy as you can, and so will I. Edith will, of course, be as happy as I can make her. I shall try.'

'I don't grudge Edith her happiness. She may as well be happy, though we can't.'

'Oh, believe me, we can, in the end. It's a habit of mind. Let us try for it. Don't be done by circumstances. What are we worth, what's our philosophy worth, if we don't work for happiness, or at least not pain. Happiness within the strict canon too—no one able to raise a finger against us! The Church might even give its blessing on the compact.'

'I remember, your father was a bishop,' said Amy sulkily.

'Amy, don't be cross. Why should we so-called intellectual people, a poor stifled minority, toiling in a web of horrid laws and ordinances, obviously made for the good of the greatest stupid number, contribute to each other's undoing, refuse obedience to salutary rules and raise up stumbling blocks for the heathen?'

Amy was bored. 'I don't care,' she said wearily. 'Arrange us as you like. I'm sure I don't want to be wicked. Only Death's at the back of all—all your fiddling, all your dancing is done on graves.'

'You are thinking of your mother.'

'Good gracious, I didn't know you even took in the fact of her death?'

'You surely don't expect me to express sorrow, or to sympathize when people die! I will, though, if you tell me you loved her and that it makes a difference to you?'

'It makes no difference, except to my pocket. No, I didn't love her, I only supported her, and yet doing that, somehow, supported *me,* and made me feel less alone.'

He took her hand.

'You must not feel alone. You will always have me, I shall stick to you till I die. I never promised that to any woman before. And you may interpret the speech as you will. If you take it as an insult, forget it; if you like it, and like to think I love you, put it away in a drawer, pull it out, look at it sometimes when you are unhappy, but let us, when I come back from Paris, be as we were before. Forget this uprising of dull, deep, unpractical things. Emotion, that can't culminate, does harm. Good-bye. You would let me kiss you, wouldn't you? . . . But I will not.'

CHAPTER XXVII

The trunks stood ready buckled and strapped in the Dands' rooms at the Hotel Rex in Paris, and Edith Dand walked about the rooms with a pensive valedictory air that prettily suggested the enforced abandonment of a nest, the end of a honeymoon. 'I hate leaving a place where we have been so happy!' she murmured, as Jeremy Dand came in and sat down. He was manipulating the refractory key of a despatch box, into which he wanted to stuff a precious battered volume of mediæval indelicacies he had picked up that morning on the quays. She came up to him:

'Leave that silly old thing alone, and make room for me.'

'Why, Edith, are you actually going to sit on my knee like the woman we saw last night? How nice and depraved of you!'

'It's the last day. Jeremy, have I been good?

'Not *too* good.'

'Well, nice?'

'Very!'

'Aren't you awfully sorry to leave Paris?'

'I shall be glad to get home.'

'But, Jeremy, I thought you said I had been nice to you here.'

'Yes, but you can be nice to me there, too.'

'It isn't the same. There's the mothers and Mr. Johnson—and Amy——'

'Yes, there's Amy,' he said complacently.

'I do believe you are looking forward madly to see her?'

'Not madly—but I am looking forward.'

'Bother Amy! Jeremy, you have been happy here with me?'

'Yes, and you?'

'Oh, awfully! You *can* be so nice, Jeremy, when you like. We have been like lovers, haven't we? And you have given me the pearl necklace you promised me, to pay for the baby—and it is to be my very own, this one, to keep myself, isn't it?'

'Yes, *foi de gentilhomme*.'

'I adore you to talk French to me.'

'Why not? You understand it?'

'Mamma had me properly grounded. What a funny thing it is Amy can't speak it, isn't it?'

'Her mamma didn't have her properly grounded, I suppose.'

'Don't make me too untidy, Jeremy! . . . I like this hat, don't you?'

'A pretty hat and a pretty woman.'

'How you do flirt, Jeremy! Am I a prettier woman than—say—Amy?'

'Much prettier.'

'Still Amy has her points. The worst of it is, she is so much too pale.'

'Poor pale Amy!'

'Why do you pity her? It is only that she eats too much pastry. She ought to marry. You know it is my dream to marry her to Mr. Johnson.'

'The rolling-pin marrying the pasteboard. No, it wouldn't do, she'd be paler than ever.'

'You don't think he is good enough for her?' She relaxed the pressure of her arms round his neck. 'You do

admire that girl, Jeremy? You can't hide it. But it's all right. So do I. I think she's a dear little thing.'

Dand laughed. 'Dear little thing! She's tall, and, mentally, at least, she could wind you round her little finger. It is amusing to hear you patronize her! She could make you do anything she liked if she had a mind.'

Edith felt indignant, the more so that what he said was true. The plan she was actually pursuing and seemed to herself to be bringing to such a triumphant conclusion had been conceived by the little thing and carried out on the lines laid down by her. The whole trend of the previous conversation had vexed her, but her irritation culminated here, and now the fierce need of self-assertion inherent in small natures rose in her and would not be gainsaid. She had promised Amy that she would not make her husband a scene. She would not do that. She fancied that without altogether giving Amy away by a confession of Amy's connivance in her plan of action, she could perhaps succeed in taking the credit of it for herself and thus convince her husband that the possession and the exhibition of character was not Amy's sole prerogative.

'Jeremy,' she said, still keeping her arm round his neck, 'it isn't Amy alone who can be strong. I have plenty of force of character, and the proof of it is——' She began to get frightened.

'Yes, but you needn't strangle me.'

She whispered in his ear: 'I feel I must tell you, dear. I once took my line, a most exceptional line; not at all the line a weak woman would take, I can assure you.'

'Bless you, my simple white lamb, what are you driving at?'

'I—no, Jeremy, don't put me away, I can speak best so. Don't think I am cross with you, dear. I don't blame

you at all—men are so different. Amy and I agree about that. I hope I can understand and make allowances——'

'Stop hedging,' said he, taking hold of both her arms and spreading them, 'out with it!'

'Jeremy, before I came away from England a lost letter was brought to me!'

'Which you read, eh?' His voice changed.

'No, it was read aloud to me—part of it! It was a letter from you to Amy, a letter she had stupidly left about——'

'Little fool!'

'Jeremy! Then you admit——'

'Admit what?' He put her off his knee, and she stood trembling while he walked about the room. . . . 'Damn women!' he exploded.

'Oh, dear Jeremy, don't, don't give way to temper! I love you still—don't imagine that this has in any way altered my feeling for you. I hope I can be superior to an ordinary wife's jealousy, though I must say, the letter——'

'Produce it!'

She trotted off to her handbag, standing ready packed on a gilt console, and took out the envelope and enclosure, addressed to Amy, just as the nurse had written it in her cramped elegant handwriting, three weeks ago.

Mr. Dand crumpled it up in his hand. 'So you brought that all the way to Paris to make a row with—on your honeymoon, too! What a *bonne bouche!* Well, here goes!' It was torn into a hundred fragments.

'I must say I thought you would want to read it?' piped she.

'Why should I? You have.'

'I tell you I have *not* looked at it. Only a few words read aloud to me by the nurse.'

'I don't believe you.'

'As you please,' said she proudly. 'I am a lady, as you thought when you married me. And now hadn't you better tell me what you are going to do about it?'

'Nothing at all. I love Amy!'

'Jeremy!'

'I love Amy!' he repeated.

'And *me?*' she wailed.

'*And* you,' he replied calmly, altering the accent so as to pervert the sense of her exclamation.

'But you can't love two women at once?'

'*I* can.'

'No, you must choose between us?'

'Amy then.'

'Oh, Jeremy, you are not serious. You are simply talking for effect, and to tease me.'

'You will find I am serious enough.'

'I rely on Amy,' said Edith. 'She and I are friends. We settled it all before I came away.'

'Ah, then I see why Amy turned me out of her room the day before I left. Someone had been at her.'

'Amy behaved very well. And so have I behaved well, Jeremy, you will find.'

'One can behave well, and be a damned fool, I perceive.'

'I may be a damned fool, but I am not such a fool as to keep Amy in the house after this. It would not be fair on the girl. I shall dismiss her the moment I get home.'

'You will do as you please. You are the mistress of my house.'

'I suppose that means that you will follow her?'

'I may or I may not. It depends on Amy.'

'I know what Amy will say. Amy is straight.' She

burst into tears. 'Oh, no other woman ever was asked to listen to—I never heard of anything so impossible, so outrageous, so cynical! And here we have been like lovers in this great big gilded hotel——'

'Do you retrospectively object?'

'I think you ought not to have——'

'Now, Edith,' said he, 'sit down, calm yourself and listen to me. This is a mere storm in a teacup; or a water butt and muddy at that. I am too much of a philosopher to permit it. . . . I want to tell you that I am a husband, a father and a householder, I have my own morality. As you may have observed, it isn't the same as yours, but it's a good working morality for all that. I love a woman I can't get and who has given me not the shadow of a right over her as you are perfectly correct in believing; it shows a degree of penetration on your part that is unexpected and praiseworthy. That being the case—Amy being nothing more than a valued friend to me—is there any reason why I should not fulfil my duties as a husband and behave decently towards a woman with whom I have no fault to find—a very agreeable, charming, good-natured woman, if a little silly——'

She demurred vocally.

'Yes, you *are* silly, most women are—but that doesn't prevent my being fond of you, very. Tell me then, when you obviously laid yourself out to be nice and chatty and pleasant as you well know how to be, and your beauty abetting, succeeded, was there any obligation on me to rebuff you? Because in my own fanciful way I pined for another woman I could not get, need I behave like a bear, as you seem to suggest I should have done in the interests of morality and decency?'

'Of course I did not suggest that you should be unkind to me! But you must be a very wicked man,

Jeremy, to use such an awful set of arguments, and tell me to my face that you love another woman. Your own fanciful way indeed! How would that sound in the divorce court?'

'I forgot you had been brought up in its atmosphere.'

'Now you are insulting my mother!'

'Dear old lady, I would not for the world! But really, Edith, believe me, sexually speaking, my conscience is perfectly clear. I have behaved ill to neither of you and don't intend to. That I happen to enjoy Amy's society as well as yours, and in a different, totally different, way is merely one of the absurd accidents of existence. There's too much law-making in this world. I ought to be able to marry both of you.'

'Free love, indeed!'

'Well, but I can't. You and your like won't allow it. Still Nature will have her way, and Amy and I are forced to meet on a somewhat different plane to that on which you and I have established our collaborative existence, It works out all right if a little tediously. But one wonders if you grasp all this?'

Edith's neck swelled. He had touched her vanity. She spoke eagerly:

'I am not narrow, Jeremy. No one has ever said that of me. If you remember, I proved it long ago by keeping Dawes in my house even after Amy said she was no good and had taken to seducing Hodges. Even then I wouldn't believe harm of her. I don't suppose there are so very many things I cannot make allowances for, climate and disposition and temperament and so on, if I am consulted reasonably and quietly, and not treated as if I was an ignorant fool.'

'I am not treating you like an ignorant fool, am I?'

'No, I suppose not. You are speaking rather rudely

and offhand, but, I believe, quite sincerely. I quite appreciate the compliment, and I am willing to meet you halfway about Amy, if you really can assure me that it's all right? A man's word of honour given freely! Amy told me herself that you had never kissed her.'

'That's true, of course.'

'She was really quite nice about it. Rather offhand, but then that's her way. When I taxed her with you——'

'Just as if I were a theft—an apple, a loaf of bread, eh? Poor Amy, I am sure you bullied her well! Women are devils to each other.'

'I didn't bully her. She bullied me. She threatened to leave at once, and I don't know what all! And the awful part of it is, I was mean enough to positively cringe to the woman I supposed, then, to be my husband's mistress, because she was my right hand and I didn't want to lose her services. She realized that and took a strong line at once. Oh, she had far and away the best of it, I can tell you! I get red all over when I think of it, how I took a back seat and played second fiddle, any sort of fiddle, to Amy. And I am very fond of the girl myself, if you hadn't come in.'

'*Ah, les hommes sont la cause que les femmes ne s'entr'aiment pas!*'

'Conceited pet! Still, Jeremy, I do like her and always shall, and I'd give a good deal to keep her with me.'

'You can, if you are modern enough to be able to reject useless and obsolete ideals of conduct.'

He went to her and kissed her.

'Is that a Judas kiss?' said she looking up.

'No. As I hope to be saved!' He laughed. 'Look here, you have got to trust me in this. Cannot you trust us both?'

'I had rather trust you, and leave her out of it.'

'Edith, be generous. You can, if you will. You are quite a decent woman at bottom, if you would only have the strength of your convictions!'

'Of yours, you mean.'

'You are getting quite perky and clever.'

'One grows a lot in moments like this,' said Mrs. Dand. 'What I meant about not trusting Amy was that surely it is quite on the cards that she might fall in love with you after all, even though, as you say, she isn't now. You are horribly fascinating, Jeremy. Look at me, here you have been saying the most awful things to me for the last hour—on the eve of a long journey, too, when we may both be killed—and here am I, your lawful wife, actually discussing your love affairs with you! The way you began was simply brutal. And the curious thing is that your poor wife whom you can apparently do just as you like with, you don't love, as much as you do Amy, who, you say, snubs you! So how is Amy going to resist you in the long run, if you are always there, and setting yourself to make her mad about you?'

'It is just because you're good enough to care for me, that I have the power to mould you and modify you, push you this way and that, like a pawn on a chessboard.'

'It is my instinct to deny my love for you, Jeremy, in self-defence, but it is no use, I cannot. I won't try. Be good to me!'

He took her in his arms.

'That is nobly said, dear Edith, and the man would be a brute who would betray you! I swear that I never will, if you choose to come home and trust me. I am the only danger. Amy is as safe as a bank, she has her amulet of chill disdain. She hates Love, and all its laws, she is weary of what she never knew. Lovers have never brought her any good. I understand her state of mind perfectly,

her heart has lost its suppleness, her nervous system its responsiveness——'

'I know. Like a piece of elastic that has been pulled out and stretched and will never be taut again. I understand. But, Heavens, what a queer arrangement I seem to be going back too!'

'Yes, but aren't we rather queer people, all of us? You would not have us ordinary?'

'No-o!'

'Well then, let us arrange to go home quietly, and do our best to behave ourselves. And remember, if it comes to the very worst, won't you, that we have had a good time here, and before, for eight years. . . . '

'What do you mean?'

'I mean fairly and honestly, but supposing the Superior Power were to thwart our poor mortal aims and intents? . . . It won't, however! Courage!'

'Couldn't you say, Jeremy, just once, that you don't really love Amy? It would make it so much easier for me, and truly, I should not call it Love, myself, the way you speak of her?'

'No, what I feel for Amy isn't what you mean by love, at this moment.'

'That's for love, then,' said the wife, happily. 'And next? *Do* you respect her much more than me?'

'Respect? Well, from one point of view I don't respect her so much!'

'But from the point of view of intellect, now?'

'Oh, yes, Amy has a good head. No, that isn't what I meant.' His face grew sombre.

She interrupted eagerly: 'A bit of an adventuress, perhaps? You can't tell where she's been and whom she has consorted with, and how much, that's the worst of it!'

'I don't know about that. And it isn't our business—

not yours at any rate. Leave her alone, and let me assure you, my dear, that this little skirmish we have had has left me with some increase of admiration of your own powers of mind. You tackled the situation like a brick——'

'Say a strong woman, Jeremy.'

'All right, I'll say like a strong woman. A Samson of sweet reasonableness. I apologize for calling you a fool. You are not. Now, are you happy?'

'I am quite happy,' said Edith Dand serenely. 'But——' And her eyes looked subconsciously knowing, for once. 'There is unhappiness for somebody in all this, I am perfectly sure.'

He agreed with his wife sadly, preoccupied in thought. She was thinking of Amy as the scapegoat—he was thinking of himself, for he had been sincere in his protestations.

PART II

HERMINIA'S PRAYER

A crowned Caprice is god of this world;
On his stony breast are his white wings furled;
No ear to listen, no heart to see,
No heart to feel for a man hath he.

But his pitiless arm is swift to smite;
And his mute lips utter one word of might.
'Mid the clash of gentler souls and rougher
Wrong must thou do, or wrong must suffer.'

'Then grant, O dumb blind god, that we
Rather the sufferers than the doers be!'

—Grant Allen.

CHAPTER XXVIII

'AWFUL fag meeting people this time of night!'

Amy wrapped up to her chin—but not in furs, she had none, and passionately envied Edith her beautiful set she had worn to go with and would return in—made this remark to the Vicar's wife, who was standing beside her on the draughty platform of the Oldfort Central Station. Her teeth chattered prettily with the cold, she was exaggerating her symptoms a little, so to make the humorous case against the Dands more obvious. They always chose such awkward hours to arrive! It was after ten o'clock, and the air was misty with frost, more incipient than present; it was freezing a little.

The placid Oldforters had gone to bed, relieved for six or seven hours of all their responsibilities, human and divine, and slept soundly now behind their closed shutters and blinds. Lights were out, gas extinguished in the town. Not so in the vast station on the great highway to the north. A forced activity partially animated the dozen or so of officials waiting on the platform, the mechanics whose duty it was to test the wheels and axles and immediate efficiency of the incoming train, the few porters and the single inspector. They were not asleep, but they were sleepy and bored, with eyes that looked dead and dull. Their intelligence was braced to a certain mechanical point of efficiency and no more, like those whose task it is to watch through the long hours of the night at the side of a death bed. The quietude too was intense, and when people spoke, the low tones of weary

inanition were predominant. The wind was sharp, and blew evenly and deliberately through the open station, where there was no shelter but the waiting-rooms. The book stall, closed, of course, reminded Amy of a blind eye.

She had driven in in the motor, which by now she had learned to manage herself competently. Mr. Dand would assume the wheel on the return journey of eight miles. They would be driving along, he and his women, chilled and hungry the most part of the night. Quite unnecessary! But why was good Mrs. Judd here at this uncitizen-like hour? She roused herself and asked a polite question. Mrs. Judd was a good soul and was known to like Amy —Amy knew what that meant, the triumph of the powers that govern predilection against principle.

'I bicycled in,' said Mrs. Judd, 'to meet my boy, the one that's in Mr. Dand's office, here, you know. He didn't want to lose a single hour of his holiday, so chose this train to come back by. He was a bit out of sorts and Mr. Dand let him off for the week clear, so he went a little bicycle excursion. Wasn't it kind of Mr. Dand? Tom's only eighteen, you know, and growing too fast!'

'Mr. Dand *is* kind,' said Amy, still politely, but carrying on her own relentless train of thought the while. She was clever at talking inferior talk to commonplace people and conducting her own introspections at the same time. 'As a novel of Thomas Hardy's is to one of Miss Marie Corelli's,' she would say, 'so is my superior conversation to my other sort.' She babbled cheerfully to Mrs. Judd and invited her to stand behind a truck as she did, and she would then 'get' the wind less.

Then, having given this comfortable hint, she cast her eyes down, and pondered, crossing the point of her toe backwards and forwards on the diagonals of the pattern traced on the stone platform. She was nervous and ill at

ease, harried with conflicting, and, for her, vague sensations.

She wished that her own errand here had been as commonplace and ordinary as Mrs. Judd's. She wished she had been meeting a son, a young calf-like creature that you had a right to be fond of and whom you simply hugged on the platform and bundled with out of the station, and home to a cold supper and bed. She seemed to be waiting for something very different, something irritating, illegitimate, joyless.

Jeremy Dand's love or even liking, was of the nature of a disruptive force, an agent of doom, which against its own will and intent might have the effect of forcing her back into the life of errantry she hated. That life had fostered the exceedingly low view that she chose to entertain of love, fearing it always as an insidious disordering passion; like fire, a good servant, but a bad master. She had never in her thirty years of life been favoured with an exhibition of the happy, stable, amorous state, as a rolling stone she had gathered no moss of sentimental associations, had collected no faith-compelling visions of man's tenderness and woman's devotion. Love, to Amy, was but the ungallant destroyer, the heartless breaker-up of homes.

She had been led, more through temper than anything else, to make a certain damaging admission to Dand before he left. He had met her with a corresponding degree of frankness and had scolded her, like a doctor, into the bargain. He had refused to kiss her, though he saw she was willing. She had done as he had scornfully bidden her, she had loyally put on one side his act of faith, without even recapitulating its terms to herself as a consolation, as he had humorously permitted her to do. She was ready to apologize for the hysterical outburst to which

she had treated him on receiving the news of her mother's death. It was an instance of occasional bad behaviour on the part of women's unstable nerve centres.

But how could he expect the enduring siege he had laid to the unused reserves of her womanhood, to be so absolutely ineffective? The wonder was that Amy, who had schooled herself to believe that a union of some kind with a member of the other sex was an indispensable condition of physical and moral welfare, should not have succumbed long since to her own theories! Instead, he had been able to pledge her to the very austerest form of intercourse ever devised by hermit and pedant. She liked the arrangement well enough, but he had seemed to forget that there was not another man within twelve miles except Mr. Johnson.

She was not perfect and was liable to suffer jealousy like other women. She had disliked his starting with his wife on a so-called honeymoon, her feminine prejudices that she could never hope to entirely get away from, resented his defection. Deplorable, but natural!

She sighed. The point of her toe caressed the stone. . . . Yes, woman is born to sexual stress as the sparks fly upward in a gusty wind. Even a sturdy, self-reliant person like herself could not altogether escape it. . . .

Jeremy Dand and his wife were on their way home. There was going to be friction and fuss. She knew that she must henceforward be careful to pay fewer visits to the nursery, and none to the study that she could help.

She would have to cultivate nice diurnal appreciations of 'the feelings of a wife and mother,' that must not be hurt, but must be continually discussed and taken into account. In the vast field of the domestic department turmoil and swither, in the little corner of the heart—

pain, perhaps, who knows? The heart and its absurdly mysterious workings, was the only organ that puzzled Amy.

'I almost believe I shall have to go after all!' she thought, as her eyes roved along the gleaming metals, flowing straight and relentlessly past her, then raying out northwards with one fork, and with the other forming the branch line to Blois and its great show cathedral, thirty miles away. She had often heard of the beauties of Blois. There the élite of business, sitting at their desks organizing labour, hectoring clerks, grubbing money in their offices all the days of the week in Oldfort were wont to repair every now and then to 'lave their hands in the cool twilight of Gothic things.' She herself had never been there, her work, the all pervading, all round woman's work, did not demand a fixed holiday, nor did she care for architecture. She was like the London charwoman who had never seen or cared to see the Abbey.

The great semaphore posted at the parting of the ways gleamed mildly down on her upturned face. All round her and below the bridge there shone, in suppressed economy of force, the tranquil yellow street lamps of Oldfort . . . sleeping . . . dreaming. The working lights of the line alone were fully alive. Their crude colours fed her excitement—light always did. Waiting at night exhilarated her, like a child, although for form's sake she had chosen to grumble about it to Mrs. Judd.

A porter passed whom she knew, for she had been kind to his wife—a kitchen-maid at Swarland. She turned to him:

'The train's late, Robert, isn't she? By the way, and how's your baby?'

'Finely, Miss, and the missus, too. We're ever so grate-

ful to you, Miss. I live in Blois Row, No. 9—just below the bridge there and the missus would be rare and pleased if you'd look in and see baby. Beg pardon, Miss, she's signalled!'

'Yes, I will. No. 9 Blois Row!—9 Blois Row!' repeated Amy to herself, as she turned and looked southwards along the steep incline that sent the train always at a rush downhill into Oldfort, and which taxed the brakes beginning from at least four miles off. The wet and greasy metals shone . . . the road was clear. . . .

'Train for Melford, Criston, Glenannan, and the North!' shouted Robert, the porter, clanging his noisy bell.

The headlights of the advancing train were now seen clearly on the incline. She was going at a fine rate, yet the brakes must be full on, Amy knew.

Amy caught hold of the brim of her sailor hat and rocked on her feet, as the train swept, almost immediately on her first sighting it, into the station. The luggage that had sheltered her and Mrs. Judd, carelessly piled on the truck, tottered and fell off in all directions. Nothing less than a tornado seemed unloosed on the quiet platform as the express thundered on, and through the station without stopping.

'It must be a special!' she heard, in the tiny voice of Mrs. Judd at her side.

When Amy recovered her balance, she looked round on an altered world. Everybody seemed wide awake enough now, the porter's face had gone as white as a sheet. The train that had dashed past was no special, but the one that was timed to stop at Oldfort!

Her eyes, like those of every soul on the platform, followed the lights of the rear carriage as it passed, still at the same rate of breakneck speed, on to the points of the Blois

line—the wrong line—the dangerous curve, that had to be taken slowly. Unfortunately the points had been left open; a local train had gone over them safely ten minutes ago. . . .

One more minute—or an eternity—of agonized waiting, and a sudden fountain of flame shot up into the air where before all had been ordered darkness and silence.

'She's over! Come on!' shouted the porter Robert. His words fell on the stillness like drops of water on a hissing stone. He was alarmed for the safety of his baby, of course, in the little house just beside the bridge, so Amy had actually time to reflect before the deafening crash came. This she always averred.

Her ears seemed useless and refused to transmit messages to her brain. All her intelligence had gone into her eyes, that watched the big blue flame burning fiercely, and a single carriage reared up for a moment against the glare and sharply silhouetted. . . .

Blocks of agitated substance, that had seemed to her, a moment ago, to be leaping frantically, lay down now, and were still. . . . They were lost to sight, fallen away in hopeless blackness, and sudden gold flames splashed the dark, full of hellish activity. Another burst . . . nearer! . . . and yet another! . . .

'Oh, my boy! My boy!' screamed the mother at her side.

The little handful of nocturnal wakers, roused from their short lethargy of horror, had begun to leap down from the platform, and were rushing, confusedly, to the goal of disaster.

'Come on!' cried Amy, to whom she knew not, and in a moment Mrs. Judd and she were plunging about in the six-foot way, scrambling over points, stumbling on sleepers, tripping on chairs. A train might have been

at their heels for all that they cared, unless indeed someone had thought of reversing the signals. Amy soon lost her companion. Perhaps Mrs. Judd's poor eighteen-year-old lad was one of the grim, wild-eyed fellows, covered with dust and blood, that came towards them, leaping, halting—she knew not? She could not think of Mrs. Judd and her boy, she could think of no particular personality, only of the mass of poor unwitting humanity caught fast over there in that relentless ambush of iron and flame. The glare from the fires she was nearing stung her eye balls, the hiss of escaping steam deafened her, yet her one desire was to reach, without loss of time, the central radiance, where life and death were locked together in a grapple.

She was not surprised or even demonstrably glad, when a figure well known to her, surged up dark against the red, and took her by the hand. His was very wet, but she clung to it.

Holding her wrist negligently, he spoke to the others.

'The train is wrecked. Half of it is gone over the bridge. Yes, Amy, I am bleeding. Don't cling to me, but come and help if you like.'

He turned round and still grasping her hand, led her to the place of death he had come from. Some angel bore up her steps, for she never looked where her feet were set, her eyes were fixed on the mass of bleeding, burning coaches in front that were the goal of her pilgrimage. She saw for a moment the huge left wheel of the engine reared high in the air, revolving—racing—slowing down—still at last! In the welter of sounds, the hot fierce vapour escaping from the boiler, spoke loudest of all, and drowned the undertone of human cries. She grew to distinguish them, and then, mercifully, the chorus of wailing voices seemed to die down. Those who were only frightened had

been led away by attentive porters or by amateur helpers like herself. . . .

'And the rest are all dead?' she asked herself, stupefied, stunned by the strenuous drone of the hissing steam.

Nay, there were piteous pantomimic ghosts leaning out of the oddly placed windows of carriages tilted at queer angles, who hoarsely implored the porters not to desert them, but to set them free. Strange calisthenic exercises ensued; legs and arms waving loosely, awkwardly, an almost laughable sight. . . .

Then it all seemed to settle down to a dull clanking of hammers and sawing of timber, a burden in the bass to the vindictive treble spitting of fire and bubbling of water, Dand turned, and spoke to Amy seriously, reasonably, for she did not look as dazed as she felt.

'Amy, you go back. You can do no good here. I must get below.'

Below! Amy looked over the almost perpendicular slope of mud embankment which the shattered bridge had once connected. Many upturned faces seemed to stare at her from the street below—a gloating crowd of night-capped sightseers. A soft cheer rose from the flaming gulf now and then. The doctors and the firemen were at work down there. The gas tanks had exploded in that portion of the train and set fire to the woodwork, as the red-hot cinders from the engine had done to the wreckage left above. Bodies must be retrieved, dead or alive. Amy still craned over. Dand touched her on the shoulder.

'Go with these,' he said speaking imperatively. 'Here, Guard!'

Three women, walking easily—'God!' thought Amy, 'what luck!' were being led away by a railway servant who was exhorting them not to look behind. Amy recognized the faces of the Duchess of Blois and her daughters, seen at

prize givings and flower shows in the other life. She shook her head scornfully in reply to the man's offer of escort back to the place of safety from which she had come with much difficulty. Leave? Not she! She meant to get down the embankment.

Looking round she observed that Jeremy Dand, who had left her side, thinking she was safely disposed of, had discovered a barely practicable mode of descent. While some others were hesitating, he had seized the telegraph wires which streamed loose over a remaining portion of the abutment of the bridge and had by this means swung himself down. Several others followed his example. Amy knew they would not allow her to do that, although she felt herself quite competent, but cast about for another mode of descent.

She looked over again and did not shrink. One of the coaches had spun down the slope and crushed its framework into match wood, all that was left of it was a matter of wheels and gas cylinders. Even the wheels were cleft apart and seemed to run in different directions, with a slab of flooring vaguely attached to them, covered with torn lineoleum.

Three or four coaches seemed to have gone over in their entirety, one was reared on its end and supported another, partially, perilously poised on the bridge at one corner. That was the one that the Duchess and her daughters had walked out of by the uppermost door, unhurt. They had been literally hanging by a thread of oilcloth. The engine of the train, to which she had now come in her prospecting for a mode of descent, lay on its left side, still on the rails. She saw two charred bodies lying on the plate. People said it was the engine driver and the fireman, and that they were both dead.

She had no time to look at them. She found a place

on the bank where the inequalities of the surface afforded some slight foothold, and where sundry broken fragments of woodwork would arrest too rapid sliding, and scrambled down.

She now had a gayish vision of the brass helmets of firemen gleaming, glowing through the deadly mirk, and the sight was cheerful to her, for she was cold, and her clothes were damp with scraping the rime of the grassy bank in her descent. There seemed to be one large central bonfire, and the flames of it scorched her face when she ventured too near. It was being dealt with. But for the most part the wreckage was burning steadily underneath, sly, unseen.

The sight was not so terrible at close quarters. The rescuers, with crowbars and picks and tools, worked cautiously, deliberately, practically, they were no more upset or excited than ordinary workmen occupied with digging a drain or clearing a culvert. And yet this handful of men were working desperately against time, combating the marshalled forces of death. Those to be rescued did not complain. They were hidden, presumably patient, under angular mountains of débris. Human breastbones and ribs, like arched girders, supported a wooden scaffolding; human arms were raised to ward off showers of murderous cinders, dropping from the interstices of enlarged kitchen grates. Amy thought of all this. In those moments she grew in imagination; her brain conceived of horrors she did not see. But on the face of it there seemed time enough and to spare, so softly the fire crept on.

The big steam cranes that were used to lift the black masses, the pistons of fire engines, pumped and rattled methodically and loudly. Indeed the work of rescue was far noisier in its operation than the forces of destruction.

Amy had quietly insinuated herself among the little band of doctors. Unquestioning they accepted her help, as hour by hour, they stooped and craned and bent and lugged at heavy weights. Amy was too busy to watch in the ordinary meaning of the word, her acute senses however fully took in the details of the scene, preserved them, and rendered them up to her later, to her cost. The wise men handled, in a businesslike way, objects that looked to her more like the detritus of a rag and bone shop than anything else. They dragged this way and that, and carefully considered, hideous deplorable scraps of personal vestiture. They recklessly thrust their hands into the breasts of cast-off coats, and with a show of breathless professional interest hung over mere heaps of soiled clothing. Once the dull gleam of footman's buttons met Amy's eyes, and the angry shine of a jewel near the charred cheek of a dead woman, wearing a breast-knot of withered hot-house flowers pinned to some wretched singed sables. A smart woman, burned alive.

'No. *That* didn't happen till afterwards,' the doctor found a moment of time to assure Amy, consolingly, as some few flakes of charred ashes that had once been rosy flesh fell away under his touch. He nodded. Then, something—not very much—of a woman was taken away, attached to a quantity of costly fur. She may have been smart, but she was now unidentifiable.

Amy came to understand the curt language of horror, the shorthand of hopeless finality. She grasped in most instances the dreary significance of the doctor's abandonment of this or that case—as with lifted eyebrow or hurried jerk of unshaven chin—'Next!'—he would say. Then as what he had been considering was borne away, hats were raised, with the indescribable touch of reverence which even busy men, fighting against time, do to the prey rapt

from them by a power stronger than themselves, and the useless science at their finger's ends.

Amy was dumbly useful. She was not manifestly hysterical, she evidenced no feelings of horror, her apprenticeship in hospitals in South Africa stood her in good stead. She tore bits off her petticoat now and then when bandages were not ready to hand. She hardly ever looked up, but once when her bleared eyes were momentarily raised, she thought she caught sight of Jeremy Dand carrying a woman's form in his arms, dead or alive, it was impossible to tell which.

It never even occurred to her to leave what she was doing for a moment and join him. She was busy. Probably this was his wife Edith, who had been on the train with him. Perhaps he had saved her, most likely she was dead? She seemed to have forgotten every personal tie, and felt herself merely the sister of humanity. Though the calcined woman in the furs might have been Edith, she did not consider her fate more appalling than that of the little wounded work girl in a ragged apron that she was tending just then and hoped to revive.

Mr. Dand's eyes fell on her as he passed with his burden, but if he saw Amy, he chose to take no notice of her. He would have no expectation of seeing his wife's companion among the rescuers; he had ordered her off into safety hours ago. She had disobeyed him like a naughty child, and he would be angry. . . .

'What is that man crying out so loud for?' she asked once, of a busy porter.

'He's afraid of being burnt alive, Miss,' was the man's reply, jerked carelessly over his shoulder.

Amy was not wanted just then. The first ardour of rescue was over. Everyone was out, more or less, lying on the bank. Some of them unrecognizable, all still. She

wandered in the direction of the extraordinarily lusty shouts. She was interested, hardened to horror like a butcher. . . .

'One o' ma legs is brokken,' the sturdy prisoner, whom they could not yet see, was telling his rescuers. 'And A' feels nawthing. The leg that hurts isn't broken at all!'

Saw! . . . Saw! . . . And the merciless fire coming nearer, though one could hardly trace its oncoming! The doctor's eyes, vigilant . . . the brandy to the lips! . . . Ho! The man was out at last, and then Amy, who caught a glimpse of the poor brave arm that had been warding off the intermittent shower of hot cinders, raw to the bone, stripped now of all flesh, fainted away, and was no more seen or heard of the busy rescuers. Where all were ardent in the good work, one could not be missed.

CHAPTER XXIX

The faint merged in a sleep and when Amy came to her senses again, the pale dawn had broken over the gigantic scrap heap that lay all across Blois Row and part of the carriagemaker's shed adjoining. No one had noticed her, or gathered her up as a victim. She had simply fallen out of the band of salvage people at one period of the night and an angle of the smashed carriage-shed had protected her from the eyes of her exhausted fellow workers. She now raised herself, waking with nurse-like promptitude, and stared out beyond the gates of the yard, into the encumbered roadway. She realized that the blaze had been got under, there was probably nothing of human consistency left buried in the uniform heap of rubbish, whence as her vision grew stronger, she observed furtive little blue twists of flame peering timidly. They were not dangerous, only they were uncanny enough as a reminder of the tough fight that had been fought with their big brother, the fire, when it was stronger. That good servant which had been master for four hours, at least, was cowed and assuaged. Very soon sightseers would be coming in from the country round to view the scene of the great inexplicable accident. But indeed there was nothing to see or excite one's self over now but a dreary ruin, a handsome funeral cairn on which a few jagged spikes and derelict fragments reared themselves up, and maintained themselves awhile, until they too fell away, weakly, bit by bit, and the dead level of the vast burial mound was reached. A heap of grey ashes under a grey sky, was all that the ghoulish crowds would see. It was the ultimate residue of a fair clever toy of man's mak-

ing, an ambulant hive of human activities, that Amy's bugbear, the Crowned Caprice, had doomed and dealt with after its manner.

The girl passed her stained, grimed hands over her face mechanically, and over her body. She was whole. Yet her limbs, the clothes that covered them, all the insignia expressive of her existence on this planet seemed hardly to belong to the naked deplorable soul that had spent a night, as it were, on Mars, or some other orb called Hell. She remembered a white dead baby lying on the bank, curved sideways, like the kernel of a walnut, with its stiff hands up to its face, a baby that had belonged to Tellus, our quiet domestic earth on which she herself lived and had once gone gaily about her daily business, nurse-tending, account-keeping, not knowing that there were other worlds where you wrestled all night with flaming fire and embattled iron and heard the shrieks of souls in torment.

Susan's baby, she supposed? She must go and break it to the porter's wife. She half rose. Her temples rattled yet she was not sure she had a headache. Worse. She looked round her, deprecating horror. She expected to see again the sights that had been laid on her eyeballs before she lay down. Their sockets smarted with the effects of smoke, they had furious red rims like those of a chimney sweep. She was no beauty.

The scene was not the same. For the evil shapes of the night's bedevilment that she had thought to have looked on again—those dark saturnine masses, barriers, piles, and heaps, streaked and blotched with red, whence there burst continually pillars of cloud with a marrow of flame—for the huddled white lights of rescue wandering hither and thither, bobbing about in unison with the jerky movements of the bearers—there was substituted the fainter

image, founded on the same lines, but dimmed now and fused in life-long sorrow and regret. The colour of blood, the clear translucence of fire, had gone out of the picture, there was now the smoked-pearl tones of morning, the dulness and opacity of despair. She grew to distinguish movement among the mass. Men were to be seen here and there, grey too in shade, like the rest, humble, unillumined camp-followers, prying and searching and grubbing among the wreck—the scattered bones and accoutrements of a battle-field. The splendid, helmeted, bloodstained warriors she had fought beside, were gone.

Another moment, and all the cocks of the district crowed out the end of the dreadful dream.

That it had not been a dream her torn skirt and bleeding hands testified. They showed the validity of her efforts to help to save, the reality of the horrid nightmare. And something else, something she had managed to disinter from the wreckage all by herself, stood beside Amy for a sign. This was a large glass bowl full of gold fish that somehow or other, when so many a higher organism had been scorched, pressed, and terrified out of life, had managed to survive. The bowl happened to have been safely banked up in the débris of the flooring of one of the carriages, and thus protected. The glass was unbroken. The water was spilt or dried up, but the fish were languidly alive. Why should they be let die? Amy had nothing else to do, so she rose stiffly, for her bones ached, and her temples throbbed when she moved, and putting her arms round the big bowl, sought a house where charitable people would afford her sustenance for these humble survivors in their degree.

A number, like a shuttlecock, banged and flung itself hither and thither in her empty mind place. It was the last precise fact she had taken in before the shock, that

is to say, the number of the porter's cottage under the railway bridge—No. 9, Blois Row.

The day had come, the light was growing full, the sky, callous, hung low with peaceful mackerel clouds, making it seem very near. Not near enough to save! She could perfectly see the numbers on the doors as she walked along the tiny row, lugging her preposterous bowl of dying, panting gold fish. She found No. 9. She had by now forgotten that it was Susan's home, Susan whom she had been kind to when she was kitchen maid at Swarland, but she counted on the nameless people of the house, out of pure humanity, giving her some water for the fish.

The house was still standing, it looked all right, the blinds were all up? She rang boldly—the porter's wife's baby was not dead, then?

Whose baby, then, was it that she had seen lying on the muddy bank, its hands upraised and clasped, its eyes closed? . . .

Someone came to the door, not Susan, someone she did not know. That someone thought she wanted the water for herself to drink and brought it kindly and a piece of bread and butter with it, but did not ask her in, giving the reason for her inhospitality.

There was a lady already there, who had been in the accident! She was unconscious, her husband had brought her in a while back, but she did not know him. She knew nobody. The doctor was with her. She was not expected to recover. The back of her head—a blow—something like that! But she was bound to die.

She had a jug in her hand and passed on, she was to get the milk for Susan's baby.

What? Die tidily in a bed? No groans! No flames! No heavy iron girders pressing out the prostrate prisoned life! Not a hideous gaping wound, but a nice, neat, fair

and square blow on the head. After what Amy had seen that night, she had no pity left for the dying lady. Mere death was nothing. We must all die. But, heavenly fate to die whole and sound and white, instead of bleeding and blackened! Would not the relations of those now still and stark, lying awaiting their faint and hesitating recognition in a mortuary, have coveted for their dead ones the blessed alternative granted to the unknown woman inside?

She sat down on the end of the stone coping that supported the railing of the tiny garden. There was only just room to sit, the strong bushes at the back crept through the railings and pushed her off. She nursed her bowl of reviving gold fish and gazed stupidly down on some dark stains on the sleeve of her jacket.

The door of the house opened and one of the doctors—she recognized him, for she had been his aide-de-camp—came out, carrying his professional bag. He did not seem particularly upset, only busy, he was used to death too.

Perhaps his lucky patient had succumbed gently, without worrying, perhaps he also, a few hours before, had happened to see what Amy had seen, the dead baby lying on the dank earth of the bank near its dead mother? And even though he had not shared that vision, the case-hardened expert Amy had worked with all through the long night of horror could easily get over the sight of a woman dying comfortably in her bed.

'Are you hurt?' he asked, stopping in front of her.

'No.'

'Waiting for someone? Are you a relation of Mrs. Dand's?' He did not recognize the girl who had torn up her clothes to make him the bandages he had asked her for in a hurry.

'Yes,' Amy answered his question.

'You can go in. She's still unconscious. I fear it's a hopeless case. No pain though!'

He lifted his hat and was gone, without waiting to listen to Amy's disclaimer of any desire to go in. Why should she want to go in, indeed? She had seen enough. All she wanted was air, and she was getting it. She sat on . . . drooping, stooping more and more over the bowl with its living, bustling tenants. . . .

The sun was up, but he did not shine. The day was neutral, noncommittal, very like any other northern autumn day. But nobody about here, at least seemed to be going off to work? She had forgotten it was Sunday, and thought of this place as a circle of Dante's Inferno—a veritable city of the dead.

A clock struck nine—or was it ten? She could not count to-day. She still sat on, and the sun began to sneak out.

The door of the cottage behind her opened again and this time it was Jeremy Dand who issued hastily, nearly falling over his child's governess. His eyes blinked, he looked heavy and hideous. He had been sitting in the dark.

He looked down at her; as Mrs. Bowman would have said, she was nothing to look at. But she certainly achieved pathos, sitting there, patient, grimed, blackened, her eyes bloodshot, her hair matted on her forehead, the suggestive dulness of the prevailing hue of her broken only by the orange flash of the gold fish across her knee. His brow furrowed for a moment as she had sometimes seen it do, when doing a complicated business calculation. Then it cleared again.

'Up!' he said placing his hands under her arm-pits, to raise her. There was no spring in her. She was inert.

'It's a shame to scold you,' he said. 'But you are a very naughty girl. I told you to go straight home, and instead

of that, you have been knocking about the whole night. Why didn't you obey me? . . . You don't seem able to take in a scolding, I see.'

He raised her chin and looked keenly into the darkened face, where in the reddened eye sockets, the eyes gleamed like coals. 'You have fever?'

'Is everyone dead?' she asked, starting up.

'Pretty nearly! Don't talk. Come with me!'

CHAPTER XXX

'Will you come and tell me, nurse, when you think that I have been with Miss Stephens long enough?'

'I will, sir. But I think you can stay over the hour. Miss Stephens is much better to-day.'

The door of the room closed quietly. Jeremy Dand drew his chair nearer to the couch where Amy was lying.

The chaste pale surroundings of a Nursing Home were in a tale with the patient's pinched face, colourless lips and sunken eyes. Amy's mouth was closed, a sign of weakness with her. In its curve there now resided a suggestion of potential voluptuousness too faint, however, to feed a taste for hasty characterization. To a casual observer, she might still appear almost Madonna like, for he would disregard the unsettled roving of the eyes, the dilation of the nostrils, the freer sweep of the loops of hair which Amy—or her nurse—cultivated. Or he might think that she looked like Undine, with only half a soul.

The room was healthily bare, and presented the uncomfortable angular appearance of an ordinary apartment set ready for cleaning. The furniture was not permitted to cling to the walls, as in the domain of the healthy. A glass-leaved table, neatly spread with utensils, was placed by, not against, the dado, and looked sharp and unsympathetic in its insulation. The bed, with electrical appliances for summoning and lighting, was without the kind chiaroscuro of curtains. On the one single austere nail on the door, Amy's little white flannel dressing jacket hung. There were no flowers in the

room. Jeremy Dand was the only visitor who came to enquire after and sit with the patient, and he was not a man who ever thought of such things. Yet the pretty blue peignoir Amy wore, the coverlid of fur she stretched over her thin knees, the embroidered bedroom slippers that adorned her feet were the result of a comprehensive order to one of the best shops in London despatched by him. He had preferred not to send for her wardrobe to Swarland. Amy, in the beginning, had been too ill to have any say in the matter, she had not escaped an attack of brain fever.

'*Can* I spare the time?' Jeremy Dand was saying, in dreary mimicry of the nurse's phrase. 'I can hardly spare the time for anything else, that's the worst of it!'

'Oh,' said Amy. 'And is your poor business suffering?'

'Not really,' he replied. 'I am there all day. At least my body is, and my calculating mind. The rest of me is here with you. By the way you were asking me about Tom Judd? He is back at his desk again, all right.'

'Tom Judd? I forget? Oh, yes——' A spasm of painful recollection passed over her face. 'Quick! Don't let's talk of all that. How is Swarland looking?'

'All right! Beautiful, autumn tints. Don't look so wistful, Amy; one would think that Swarland was Paradise. It is more like Purgatory to me. I don't care about going back every night. I have taken a bed at the Central. I prefer to sleep in the same town with you.'

Amy did not question this sentiment. She seemed to have no impulses of coquetry left.

'Yes, of course, I understand.' she replied, in a low voice. 'It must be a sad house—just now.'

'I slept neither here nor there last night!' he said carelessly. 'I slept in London.'

'Business?'

'The business of choosing your furs.'

'My first furs!' the woman murmured dreamily, deeply impressed, but too enraptured to remember to proffer her thanks.

'Yes. Very fine skins. We must think of a way for you to account for them. Sable coat, tie and muff.'

'Oh, thank you. How much? I know you want to tell me.'

'Yes, for it was a bargain. Five-fifty.'

'Oh, how could you be so kind! Five-fifty! It's a great deal of money.'

'They are better than Edith's. You could get eight hundred for them easy.'

'And hers were the best in the county. Poor Edith! How proud she was of them. Oh, dear! It brings it home to one so. To think that she will never, never wear them any more!'

'Wear them no more?' Dand repeated, looking into her face.

'They will have to be put aside for Erinna. But, I believe, if Edith had had her choice, she would have been buried in them.'

Dand laughed. Then he continued to peer, with bleared eyes, into the coals. . . .

A few seconds elapsed—parcels of momentous time which the cheap clock on the mantelpiece ticked out as it ticked out the hours of medicine. When at last Dand spoke his voice was very soft—the voice of mischief.

'Aren't you getting rather tired of me as sole visitor, Amy? Wouldn't you like Mrs. Bowman or Lady Meadrow, or both of them, to come over and see you? They are

quite ready to make the trip. They talk of you continually.'

'I had rather not.'

'You relieve me.'

'Why? Don't you want them to come?'

'On the whole, no. I just gave you the chance.'

'But can't you bring Erinna to see me?'

'No, I cannot.'

'Stony refusal! But may I send a message to Janie Summerbell?'

'A thousand, if you like.'

Amy gave a purely domestic message. He listened to it with punctilious attention. Then she laid her hand on his arm:

'You have not put the child into mourning, have you? I do think it is so unnecessary, and as a matter of fact, I don't believe that children now-a-days mourn even for a mother.'

'Erinna wears white,' said Jeremy Dand.

'I am so glad. You agree with me. . . . Do you know I can't help wondering how the old ladies will choose their black without me? I should have arranged the whole thing for them in the proper degree as I did last year when your cousin Greatorex died. This of course is blacker black. It will suit Lady Meadrow's fair—hair.'

She felt that here the word wig would sound crude. She resumed her soft, even speech, and Jeremy Dand, quiet as usual, watched, not her face, but the large volcanic coal that spluttered in the heart of the fire.

'As for your mother, it will be no trouble to her, for she always does wear black. I am afraid she will want to go in for crape—nasty messy stuff! Oh, why do I talk to you of clothes! Will you read me some poetry now?'

He read Shelley's 'Ode to Hellas.'

'Poor Amy, pretending to care for poetry!'

'I have never thought of poetry before,' she said, 'except as a mine of quotations to floor people with. I suppose that was unfair, like picking the plums off the top of a cake?'

'But just as the plums in a cake sink to the bottom, the best thoughts in poetry lie deep and not so ready to your hand. Amy, you are a superficial little monster, but I love you. . . . Your tired smile, as I make that statement, seems to say that it doesn't matter, that you think my offers of devotion mere extravagance. You look on it as a piece of sentimental rhetoric—sort of useless determination of affection in your direction?'

'Well!' began Amy, 'if you knew how unimportant it all seems to me, now, our earthly loves and hates, not that I believe much in any heavenly ones! I never was religious, but now I must tell you, I am done with a righteous Providence—disgusted with a Jealous God!

'"*A Crowned Caprice is God of the world.*
On his stony breast are his white wings furled.
No ear to listen, no eye to see,
No heart to feel for a man hath he."

'He allows death—and death takes the sting out of mere tragedies of the heart. I think that picture of Watts', the towering figure of Death and the little twopenny halfpenney Love he is frightening into a corner, expresses what I think of it all now. Whether you loved me, or Edith, or both of us, was a puzzle once, when we had time and leisure for it, but now, that Edith has been taken out of the problem by *force majeure,* it has broken its back and there seems no need to bother!'

'No need to bother,' said he quietly, 'since Edith has

gone out of the problem. Very well, so be it, leave her out. So it is just you and I. We can settle things for ourselves. I mean to make you forget. I mean to make you happy. Don't think of her.'

'Yes, I do think of her,' said Amy wilfully. 'I think of her kindly, almost lovingly. At first, she was so mixed up with—all *that*, you know, that I was afraid to think of her. I could only see her dead. Not maimed, the doctor said so——'

'When did you see the doctor?'

'Just before you came out of the cottage. It was he who told me that there was no hope, that she would never regain consciousness. Good for her!'

'I don't know about that. It is never nice to die. So it was the doctor who put the idea into your head, not I?'

'Yes; he said, "No pain." So you see, I am able to think of her nice and white and pretty as usual. I don't feel any remorse——'

'Why should we, either of us?' he asked brusquely. 'I needn't, anyhow. You have taken the whole thing out of my hands. You have a way of doing that. You are determined always to be the mistress of your fate and a jolly bad thing you make of it!'

'I meant remorse at having behaved badly to her. Now that she is gone you can't think how happy I am to think that——'

'That you never let me kiss you? That you never even provoked me to offer to kiss you! It was the triumph of mind over matter. But mind you, it took a very inhuman kind of woman to do it. You are.'

'Will you kiss me now?' she said gently.

'That makes you mine,' said he, as he resumed his seat.

'Does it?' Amy's kissed mouth smiled.

'Yes. The rest is all behind us. Leave it there. But tell me, why did you suddenly say that I might?'

'Because you spoke bitterly, and I felt that I could so easily kill that bitterness. Bitterness should always be killed. It's so anti-social.'

'And is that all? Don't you love me?'

'Yes, I suppose I do, under that awful canopy of disaster that hangs over us all. I seem now to see a sort of judgment seat, before which we all squat and cower——'

'The altar of the Crowned Caprice?'

'Yes, and it may if it chooses, doom us any minute, *"to be the one to suffer,"* so what does it all matter?—*"in the clash of gentler souls and rougher——"*'

'Amy, suppose I take you at your word? Shall I, may I assume that our relations may take their natural course, not necessarily an irretrievable one—that depends so much on mood—but say we can go the way our emotions take us, whatever it is? That absurd unnatural position of ours at Swarland—how I chafed at it!'

'I don't think you chafed, any more than I did. It isn't in you to care very much about what you can't get. We were both very happy. Confess! Well, *I* was happy. We may be just as happy again, when I can forget all this. And any way, things are a little different now. We are both free. We need not use our liberty, but——' She raised herself a little and looked into his eyes. 'Dear, we have neither of us what people call honest eyes. So it is no good. I won't look into yours for an answer to my question, but I will ask you to tell me this? I am to understand, am I not, that we are going to be together for the rest of our lives?'

'Yes, Amy.'

He kissed her again. 'Say now that you are glad that we are going to be together.'

'Yes, quite glad.'

'It means that you love me?'

'I suppose it does mean that. I don't know. Wait till I am better, and I shall be lucid, and sensible. I am only half a woman, now. I simply can't think of you except as something kind and strong. So unlike me. I am changed.'

'You were potentially attractive to me, now you are absolutely, enduringly, so. You have only one fault, Amy, you do not, have not, set enough store by yourself, and the gifts that you can give. Your deprecatory attitude towards life has been the ruin of you.'

'But who said I was ruined?' she exclaimed lightly. 'Now, tell me, when may I come home?'

'Not yet.'

'They all, the doctor and the nurse, think I am well enough to move now. I should get better at home much sooner, I can tell that myself.'

'I don't want you to go back there yet.'

'It is no use asking you for a reason?'

'No, none! Sensible woman! I am not to be disappointed in you—at the very first go off, I see. But of course you cannot stay on here. You must go somewhere for an after-cure. It ought to be the sea. I can't take you there myself.'

'Why not?' she asked, with some of the pettishness of an invalid.

He looked at her gravely.

'Well, for one reason, that I am a busy man and cannot leave my work. But what about Blois? You have never seen Blois, have you?'

'No.'

'I know of good lodgings at Blois, in North Street, quiet, and clean, and sweet. Opposite the cathedral, with

a fine view. I *could* plant you there for a short while, but even with a view, you would be lonely enough through the week.'

'Do you mean you would come and stay with me from Saturdays to Mondays?'

'I could, of course. That is why I mentioned Blois. But it would hardly do.'

'Are you meaning from my point of view?'

'From no one else's.'

'You forget that I have never been accustomed to be chaperoned, I have never had time or money. When I was with Sir Mervyn—oh, don't look at me like that! I can't bear that look in your eyes.'

'Horrid man's look! I know. You shan't be tormented with it. Go on.'

'Well, when I lived with Sir Mervyn Dymond, once, for three whole months in London, what chaperon had I? Nobody but your Mr. Johnson. Did you know that?'

'Yes, you dear innocent adventuress, I did know it. It all comes in. It's part of the horrid web of things.'

'But, no one ever thought of saying it was improper.'

'There was no one to say so! No one ever saw you there, I suppose? Dymond was not much sought after at the time, if I remember.'

'But if they *had* seen me, nobody would have stirred a step to the rescue. Why should they? I was above the laws of chaperonage, or below them. I was a working woman, not a society girl living in an artificial state of care and wardship. The sort like me, the greater number, that can't afford to be kept in a greenhouse, who thinks of them and what they do, till they are fished out of the river or come tottering, two of them, out of the workhouse? Do you think that people trouble to chaperon their pretty servants that they leave there all the summer in an empty

house, alone with a troop of painters and paperers? No. *They* are not in society, it is no matter for them, they must just keep a good look out.'

'And did you keep a good look out?' he whispered. She went on unheeding:

'Sir Mervyn was the only man who realized it. He offered to marry me.'

'Then he was not such a villain as I thought.'

'Nor a villain at all. Just a man of the world—of Lady Meadrow's horrid, indecent world.'

'You ought not to bring my mother-in-law in, dear Amy. Respect for grey hairs!'

'I know. I am sorry. I have no manners. How can you marry me?'

'Well, will you go to Blois? I'll speak to the doctor and the matron of this.'

'It sounds very nice—if I really may not go home?'

'Not at present. But I will come over and stay at Blois sometimes with you, if you will let me? . . . But, dear, reckless Amy, are not you afraid that I shall want to be your lover?'

'I don't see why you should?' she replied indifferently. 'After all those calm years at Swarland!' She was getting tired. She wanted him to go. Looking pensively down at the lace sleeves of her peignoir, she remarked with weakly enthusiasm:

'I do like those little frills!'

The man, adrift on a theory of her past which she unconsciously fostered, was rebutted by the simplicity of the woman who had been through Sir Mervyn Dymond's hands. He concluded her to be a nature on whom the effect of one of the greater eventualities of a woman's existence is inoperative through some accident of temperament or mere absence of morbidity. Anæmic women are

apt to be superficial. Amy was clever, but inartistic; pathetic, but not passionate. Like some little city plant, she had sucked her nourishment from a used up soil, full of strange surprises; thin, but interesting and various. The springs of her emotions, such as they were, had never been tapped; the careless surface explorer had reaped no wonderful psychological harvest. It had been left for him, who loved her.

CHAPTER XXXI

In Blois Cathedral three weeks after the terrible Oldfort railway accident, there wandered languidly the usual number of perfunctory, unambitious sightseers. They were persons who roamed about, their heads hardly knowing what their feet were doing, their faces mostly worn horizontally, as they gazed, at the bidding of the fervid verger, on the magnificent span and the old original timbers of the roof. To-day it had rained and the air without was humid and unreviving. Within, the aroma of dreamy stoves, the clanging of whose heavy doors sounded at intervals through this vast Gothic cellar, as the clerical stoker, shuffling about desultorily on his wooden leg, replenished them, deadened the atmosphere. In the aisles the voice of the cicerone verger, a 'character,' retrieved in the past from Baptist circles, was heard like a faint droning whisper as he piloted the chary, wary American round the chapels and clashed his keys at the entrance to the white marble tomb of St. Gundred. The parties, he led, slavish, weakly stepping tourists, with their ugly bags and satchels, looked like ants gathered round a gigantic roc's egg. Amy and Jeremy Dand scorned his assistance, they had been here several times before. It was not because they were unenthusiastic.

'Fine, isn't it?' said he.

'Very fine,' she replied.

The cathedral dwarfed him. Hatless, his pince-nez raised, reverent of architecture and of religion, though critical and questioning of both, Amy saw him under a new light, now that he belonged to her. The motives

and consequent motions of the cathedral builders were full of contested points. They interested Mr. Dand deeply and always had. He murmured half to her and half to himself:

'It is a question and I doubt if we shall ever solve it, whether Bishop Adhemar—do you know we are living in what is popularly called Admer's lane, though officially North Street—whether Adhemar finished to the end of the choir or only as far as the first bay of the nave?'

'*Where* do you say to?'

'The first bay of the nave. Just there! He evidently intended to do so—it is my belief he did.'

She held in her hand a shilling guide purchased a few moments ago from the custodian, and referred to it.

'Let us see what the book says.'

'The same as I say. I wrote it.'

Her enfeebled intelligence seemed unable to comment on this trivial but new idea. She turned round, and looking wildly towards the east entrance, asked in a trembling manner:

'Where are we living now? Can you tell me? *We!* . . Oh, dear!'

The man gently pivoted her by the shoulder in the direction of the great iron portals. Then he replied quietly:

'We are staying in lodging on the other side of the river, and very nice lodgings they are too. Good clean, sensible landlady—asks no questions, doesn't pester you with conversation when I am away, does she?'

'Oh, no—but I wish I was dead.'

'Hush, now, Amy.'

They left the cathedral. She babbled on weakly.

'You promised you would make me forget. You put your fingers over my eyes, and swore that I could see

nothing. But I saw—I still see. I see the whole thing. Lights going off—*blumping* into round balls, with a loud noise, behind me—beside me—anywhere I don't expect. Just now before we left the cathedral, the altar was bursting into flames and I seized the guide book and tried to take my thoughts off, and you wouldn't let me look at it. Oh, I am worn out with seeing—and hearing! The shrieks! . . .'

He said gravely: 'You must not think so much of shrieks. Probably it was the people who were frightened that cried out, not those that were hurt.'

'Oh, no, they were all dead, but they screamed before they died! Poor, dear Edith! I was really fond of her. . . . *She* didn't scream. . . .Why didn't you let me see her? I know now that it was what I wanted. The doctor said I might go in and see her, but I refused. . . . It would have settled me, to see her looking calm. She looked calm? Swear she looked calm?'

'Yes, quite calm. On my honour she didn't know anything of it all—didn't suffer.'

'She only died. Well, well, death is nothing. I wish it had been me!'

'Amy! Amy!'

'I annoy you,' said she, with perspicuity. 'Tiresome woman I am! I'll be quiet. Just tell me again quietly, how you came to leave her side in the train?'

'Just before we came within a mile or two of the station I got up, and walked forward along the corridor to another part of the train.'

'Why did you do that?'

'For no reason. Yes, I will tell you. I did not want to see *you* first, in her company.'

'So you let her die!'

'Get in!' he said almost roughly. He had hailed a

dilapidated-looking station fly that slowly crawled up at his bidding, and they were driven over the cobbles of the market place, across the river and up the steep stone-paved street that led to North Street. She sought for, and took hold of his hand under the ginger coloured rug.

'Jeremy, I know that I am unjust. Nerves? I do beg your pardon for them. You never thought I would start being feminine, did you!'

'Oh, yes, I knew you would. You have been feminine ever since the morning I found you sitting there all alone on the wall outside Susan's cottage, hugging your bowl of gold fish, and all the rest of you as black as my hat. I can remember it now. I could not stand it.'

'Did you pity me so very much, Jeremy?'

'So much that I showed my pity by ruining you. That is what man's pity is worth, to women. And I swore to Edith in Paris that I would not do this thing. My only excuse is, I do mean to be good to you.'

'I am sure you do.'

'Nonsense, child, you are sure of nothing. Up till a week ago, you were hardly sane. You are not much better now. After this scene, I see I shall have to be very careful of you. . . . The funny thing is, Amy, that you are more desperately honest, you are straighter in every particular, than I dreamed. How could I let myself think——? I know this now, you were by far the chastest being in my house. My mother-in-law, with her hundred divorce cases, is a Messalina to you. . . . It is your cursed habit of undervaluing yourself that has undone you, if you only knew! . . . Amy!' He helped her out of the cab, paid the man and rang the doorbell of a little cobby house with an impertinent bow window, a distinction shared by no other house in the row.

'I took this place for the sake of the bow,' he remarked, looking up, 'so that you might have a good look out at the cathedral when you felt depressed——'

His eyes sank again to the level of her face.

'Don't, don't look so pathetic. You make me feel villainous.'

The landlady opened the door and singly, respectably, they proceeded upstairs to the front room with the bow. Amy, without taking off her hat, sat down in a basket chair drawn into the oval, and stared across at the cathedral as he bade. Dand threw his gloves down, savagely, on the table with its tragic black, flower-begarlanded cloth.

'Yes, I thought I knew women. What's more, I thought I knew you, and you have taken me in!'

'Taken you in? Deceived you, do you mean?'

He laughed. 'Oh, don't be afraid. It's no aspersion on your honesty. You have only taken me in to your own disadvantage. You yourself are the loser by your innocent deception.'

He came and sat beside her, in another creaky chair, drawn up to the window and together they stared at the great building on the other side of the river.

The old builders of Blois Cathedral chose their spot well. The altitude is not so great, but the effect, atmospheric, probably, of the haze rising from the smoky town below obscures the foundations and lends a sense of height, of distance to the vast block of masonry comprised in cathedral, college, and castle, which no other group of buildings in the world can claim. Yet little North Street, with its wide-flagged pavements and the low wall like a city rampart under which many small gardens, neglected, hairy with clematis, and rank with the droppings of unpruned bushes, slope down sharply to the river Duren, is

probably not more than two hundred years away from the two central towers that crown the other bank.

'It gives me the same feeling of unreality that my Japanese dwarf tree at home does,' said she at last, 'as if it and I were not on the same planet, an eerie, uncanny, feeling.'

'And I,' he said, 'could easily imagine that I see it all in a kind of opium dream, a palace of Kubla, or Adhemar Khan.'

'There are people,' Amy continued, 'who would get some sort of help from looking at a building like that!'

'Or say they do? A mere matter of association. But we!—I suppose, if we would allow that kind of influence to sink in?—It certainly has an appeal for me. In the blood. The thing my people fought for——'

'Sometimes,' said she, 'I think it is a pity we do refuse to let it sink in. The Fear of our Fathers, that Ruskin speaks of—we have lost it, and it was perhaps after all a salutary thing?'

'We teach it in our board schools? That's all right. Amy!' he laid his hands on hers. 'Do you know I have come to this—I want to ask you, here, to make the old, old vow. I feel as if I must put the question to you, and hang on your answer, like a boy. Come, do you love me?'

She stood up, with a gesture of infinite weariness.

'And I can't answer like a girl, as you wish. I am confused. Oh, why need we go into heroics, you and I? It is so absurd. I haven't the instinct for it, or else all is vague in me. I know so little about it all, and I do not want to know.'

'And I have taught you nothing—nothing? Well, never mind, you are yourself, you can't alter yourself and here you are, cruelly, tactlessly sincere, you, who in other matters have as many eyes as a snail and the softest hand on

a mouth—I mean a horse's mouth—not mine, good God! You never touch me, you never kiss me of your own free will. And I long for something to make my crime seem worth while, something to lighten the burden of my remorse.' He laughed nervously.

'I can't tell what your crime is—oh, yes, I suppose I do. Never mind that.'

'You should mind, you ought to mind. You ought to let me spend my whole life in expiating it.'

'There *is* one little thing you could do for me.'

'Well, what?' he returned impatiently, repentant already of his unpractical impulse. He tried to take her in his arms. To his surprise she yielded and became at once the clinging thing he would have had her—a woman intent on getting her way, Delilah-wise. Her mouth was upturned to his, her lips alternately kissed and pleaded.

'Go away—go home.'

'And leave you, here, alone over Sunday?'

'Yes, I've been alone here before, and they are very kind to me. She's a nice simple motherly woman. I am not afraid of being alone. What else has my life been. But one thing—I must, I *must* be by myself. I think I shall go mad if you won't allow it!'

The servile expression she used pleased him. 'Only tell me why?'

'Because I can't see, I can't find my way while you are there, focussed right in the middle of my picture. I want to ask you to get out of the light all the time. I don't mean to be rude, but you do prevent me seeing clear. Please, please indulge me!'

'Kiss me again, and I'll do anything for you.'

With a power of abandonment he had never before seen in her, Amy was about to comply with his request, but he arrested her.

'No,' he said, 'on second thoughts, I won't have that kiss. Too slavish. And you are nothing less than slavish. You have been so good that you deserve that I should respect your wishes. I will go. After dinner. And I will come back on Sunday.'

'No, Monday.'

'But my work?'

'You can leave it for one day.'

'Not without damage. Now you are attacking my purse, and you know that that affects me considerably. You must take it as a measure of my regard for you—and my remorse, if I comply.'

'That mysterious remorse!' said Amy almost cheerfully, as the landlady knocked loudly at the door, and then brought in tea. She was like many of her North country sisters, sad and dour and kind, motherly too, in a languid inartistic way. The vitality had been battered out of her by a bad husband, and the poetry by constant consideration of the business aspects of life. It is generally the way in a show town. Sentiment is non-existent under the walls of a pair of the most splendid mediæval monuments that the world has ever seen. The sweetness and light inherent in Blois and its suggestive stones is only for the strangers that visit it. There are persons in Blois who have never found time to go over to the Castle that parties of trippers come thirty miles to see. Mrs. Gray was one of the recalcitrant, but she looked ladylike, she could cook, and her faint weariness of manner was soothing. Mr. Dand considered that he had fallen well. These sad self-contained women are too practical, too languid to permit themselves reflections on the respectability of quiet people who pay, not through the nose, but decently and in order. She left them, with her usual 'You'll ring if you want anything?'

CHAPTER XXXII

At dinner, Amy, who usually ate a small piece of meat and hardly anything else, let herself go, swallowed oysters and drank champagne. She had put on a tea gown that Mr. Dand had sent to London for, and it was the first time, although it had arrived two days ago. Up to now, she had chosen to wear a black high gown that she had 'run together' herself, in a few hours, out of material bought in Blois. He knew she looked on it as mourning for Edith, although mourning was against her principles. The dress Mr. Dand had bought was white and suited her. He praised his own taste, complimented himself on knowing what to order, and informed her of the sum that it had cost.

She cared for him well enough to tolerate the symptoms of his ruling passion, and even met them with a jest.

'When a miser bought me such an expensive dress,' she observed, 'I knew the miser loved me.'

'You dare to give me the satisfaction of hearing you say that, and indulge your own love of a gibe, simply because I am going away!' said he pettishly. 'Otherwise you think it would implicate you too much. Women are all the same, they like to play the game of tag with the man that loves them, charge when he retreats, and plant flags on danger mounds.'

Amy sat with her chin propped in her hands at the other end of the table, she knew that what he said was true. She spoke softly, as a woman does when she had been given her will.

'In some ways, I am *not* glad you are going. And my gladness is nothing to what I should feel if I were going with you!'

'With me to Swarland? Good Lord! . . . Amy, why do I go, to-night? Your eyes are so bright—you are making yourself so charming——'

'Only because I keep thinking of you an hour or two hence, driving along in the cold, most of the night and sent by me. I still choose you to go, I insist, but I seem to want to give you a good send-off!'

'Yes, and you are doing it too well, making me too happy. I have never seen you like this. Wonderful! The first time since——' He was thinking of the accident, but stopped himself and laughed nervously. 'Well, I shall be sure to come back on Monday!'

'Would you mind telling me if Erinna asks after me at all?'

'Why should I mind? Of course she does.'

'You never mention her to me.'

'Jealous, I suppose?'

'Oh, you mustn't be jealous about Erinna. I always did love her, you know. Desperately. I'm sure I can't think what I shall do about her, if——. Well, wait till Monday. Tell Erinna that I am getting on slowly, and that I hope to see her soon.'

'You mean when we are married, don't you?'

'Oh, before that, I hope.'

'I was glad, because your remark appeared to imply a more favourable answer to the question I asked you this afternoon.'

'I like you,' she said hesitatingly. 'I have a very great affection for you, especially since you have been so obliging about going, but——'

'Obliging? I admire your subtle choice of words!'

'Well, I can't find the right ones.'

'No, for our language has no shades, no words for half measures, it is no real medium of communication in such a delicate matter as the relations between the sexes. For us poor Englishmen, there are no possibilities of amorous adjustment——'

'It is very true.'

'Not of me. But then I conceive of love differently from most men. I see it not as a whole, but broken up into many states and conditions, not as a passion, but as a mood, an expression of the individual imagination, and as such infinitely varying, in quality and quantity. I see the gratification of it as an amelioration, not as a life's object attained—a by-product of the emotional quantity of one's nature. I have told you I loved you, Amy, and when I say it, it is instinctive and therefore true. I believe it, but when the mood is past, I can criticise the articles of my belief and wonder, not if I said what I meant, but if I meant what I said. You don't admit to returning my feeling for you, so this is not to offend. I only know that I can say these things to you and to no other woman. And another thing I know and that is if the worlds were clashing and paling round us, and our doom of annihilation staring us in the face, I should wish to render up my spirit, or go clean out, whichever it is, with my lips against your cheek—so——'

For Amy had risen and come round to his side of the table, insensibly drawn and drugged by his discourse. He continued:

'But of course that's only a sop to the cringing, puling, infantine human element in us all—afraid of the dark—of strange noises—of the vast unearthly, in fact. Like children, we feel a need of soft fleshly comfort, of the mere touch of a human skin next to ours in the imminence of

molecular catastrophe. The distressed, disturbed cells rush at once to the warm neighbouring life——'

'You are talking like a book,' said Amy, smiling.

'Yes, like a Cambridge professor. All the same, Amy, I should like to be buried in the same grave with you, to rise with you—or what seems more likely, lie still for all eternity, holding perhaps your little finger, while the new set of upper people rave and fret. I have always thought that was Love.'

'It's one theory,' said Amy coldly. She had gone back to her place again.

'Well, you like theories, you are made up of theories, bless you! And for once you have put your theories in practice. I am glad, for it has resulted in this—this perfectly charming commonplace reprehensible relation between us. Aren't you glad too? It isn't given to everybody to live their life as they would have it and think it ought to be. Here we are, as many another quite ordinary man and woman are, with no pleasant theory at all to support them—at variance with our environment, naked to the law——'

'Nay,' said she, reasonably. 'You are surely wrong there. The Law cannot touch us simply because, so far, we have not invoked its protection, its blessing—if we ever do?'

She became thoughtful, and glanced up at the clock.

He followed the direction of her eyes. 'Yes, I must go. Does that doubtful addition imply that you are never going to get me to marry you, like any other prudent woman in your place? Oh you little duffer! Shan't you ask me to give you my old and honoured name to take care of? Not you! In this case, although I don't doubt it would save a precious deal of trouble, I am not going to give you your

own way. No, marriage—marriage by banns and all the rest it shall be, I swear it.'

He rose.

'Amy, say good-bye to me this once, as a woman should say good-bye to her lover. Your wretched skinflint methods won't do any more. You are too pretty, too warm, too tipsy, in fact. Cast your theories aside and let us agree to be plain honest hearty breakers of the law of the land. Let us just leave out of count our poor over-taxed brains, that simmer and bubble over natural things that ought never to be problems at all, and boggle at words that must always be inadequate. . . . Even I am talking shop at this very minute. Don't argue. . . . Man and woman created He them! . . .'

He held her in his arms and looked down on her tormented face with that fused fervid gaze of the successful lover, in which possessive pride of the man and prophetic bitterness of the friend are commingled.

CHAPTER XXXIII

For the first night since the accident, Amy slept well and soundly. Hers was a sweet and dreamless sleep, the sleep of the just. In this bath of pure oblivion the horror which had marred her intelligence, and confounded her politics slipped utterly away from her and she knew, on waking, that she need fear no recrudescence of the anguished mood that had overtaken her in Blois cathedral the day before.

She was no longer hysterical, that was all. But what had happened—had happened! The old easy tenor of her days at Swarland with the master of it, Jeremy Dand, her devoted friend merely; beside her life, but not of it, was henceforth impossible. Their relations, close enough for her, had not sufficed him. He had accepted them patiently enough until she lost self-control and recklessly gave him the excuse he wanted for behaving like other men. Up to that time neither of them, honestly, had intended to allow the situation to become complicated with sex, the man even less than the woman, in whom the substratum of pale unproven theory was all the while inimical to conventional morality.

Now, that with his assistance, she had been able to work out these theories of hers to their full extent, she found the glow of self-congratulation strangely wanting. Her state had been both pleasanter and happier when they were in abeyance, consequences still hanging in the air, matters to argue about in cold blood, over tea tables, and in sunny arbours, than now, when she had proved them on her body. She realized that certain vague and delicate perceptions to be found scattered about her being in various

degrees of density, disregarded by her, had all along been standing her in lieu of conventional morality. And if these useful inhibitions had not been temporarily maimed and rendered of no avail, her theories would have remained forever unestablished. It was mental illness which had blunted her fine sense of rectitude and economic proportion—Dand's passion, which she had never truly envisaged, abetting. The languors of the sick room, that a few wholesome breaths of fresh air would have dispelled! But she had been managed, she who knew best about herself, she had been carried off to Blois and planted in quiet secret lodgings in a back street, like the sort of woman he would have her to be.

He had been most kind, most wise, most sympathetic. She had not known till Blois, that he cared for her so much and in that way. Why should she have made difficulties, whose very love of life was hopelessly bruised, who had chosen always to maintain that the sexual relation was a mere matter of detail? She had no care for herself, and as for abstract morality, it had been forever abolished for her on that night when she had seen with her own unshrinking eyes, poor human life, without truce or power of appeal, crushed like a penny matchbox in the hand of some Superior Power. She did not rebel, or criticize, she simply took the law of *laisser-aller* to be her law henceforth. Not self-preservation, rather self-annihilation! Dand was hers now, and she was reckless in her merely superficial good-humoured desire to please him. Why not? He was good to her. He had come to her at the moment of her direst need, as she sat mute in the dreary dawning, face to face with appalling truths and staring down hideous vistas of atheism. He had held out his hand to her. She had laid hers in his because he was kind, and nothing mattered. He did not know she was

reckless; he thought she trusted him. Why should she not let him think so?

Her bedroom was at the back of the house in North Street. She had chosen it, leaving the fine front bedroom over the drawing-room vacant for Jeremy when he came. It had the view. She pretended not to care for views. So when she had done thinking that Sunday morning and got out of bed and drawn the window curtains as mechanically as she had opened her eyes, she looked out for help and comfort on to an immediate foreground of water butts and wash tubs, while beyond them again lay a dreary rain-soaked expanse of sodden green grass, the playground of the Blois Grammar School. Hopelessly it stretched out before her in its weekly inviolable solitude. Two goals for football planted at the farther end of the space suggested a gallows, and the whole outlook spelt mediocrity, sameness, the struggle for existence, and despair.

To dispel it she ran quickly in her night-gown into the front room where the remains of last night's farewell feast still lay spread. His napkin idly flung just as he had left it—the heel-taps in the glasses—the innocent country cheek of an apple glowing on a dish in the middle of the table! It was not yet seven. Presently Mrs. Gray would come in, curl-papered and sleepy, to clear it off and prepare for Amy's solitary breakfast. She would be purposely late, on a Sunday morning; there was no hurry. Amy strolled towards the window, with a brief but motherly glance at the goldfish swimming aimlessly about in the fresh water, opening their bloated Victorian mouths at her from behind the walls of their glass prison, then turning away, and presenting their finny tails, pink, translucent, indifferent. Amy fed them. The somebody else who used to feed them was dead.

In the grey mists of the dawn of the workless day, the two

square towers of Blois across the river rose calm, stately, and immutable. Amy thought she could have guessed that it was Sunday. Something in their benign and patient attitude told her so. The workaday look was laid aside; grand inanimate pieces of masonry have a sly way of aping those stir-abouts called men that grouped them and made them cohere, and gave them the soul that may reside in splendid architecture. The bases of the towers were hidden, the rainy mists clung about the feet like a garment. The whole mass of buildings reminded Amy of a greyhound couchant. In the crenellated towers were empty slits that might be taken as the raw orbits of haggard sightless eyes, there was nothing at the back of them but sky.

Now that the man for whom she had consented to forfeit her independence, had left her, Amy acknowledged her need of support, as she had not done before. How could it be otherwise? She was a woman dowered with the latent instinct of clinging, unexercised, through the former exigencies of her position. Now that she too had adopted the feminine attitude and abandoned her sturdy standards of self-sufficiency, she was more helpless than a person who has never walked alone. The cords that had anchored her to independence were hanging in loose strands, waving in the strong wind of life's stress, like the broken telegraph wires on Blois Bridge which Jeremy Dand had climbed down by, to save lives on the night when he had marred her own. She still drew, it will be seen, her illustrations from the catastrophe that had unhinged her mental apparatus, and thrown her on the unsafe guidance of her emotions. But she thought no more of the sufferers and the dead, the imminence of her own affairs had rushed in, and excluded altruistic gropings and regrets. The Oldfort hospital was doubtless crowded, but she had left it behind. She was a woman, who had once for all been familiarized

with the woman's cheap, sexual power that she had always despised, used to the violent amenities and the tender exigencies of male companionship. And she had purposely sent Jeremy Dand away from her side to find out if she would miss them and him.

She did miss both, desperately.

'*I* don't know?' she said again with the usual shrug of her thin shoulders. She returned to her dull dark bedroom and dressed, then ordered and ate her breakfast. Then she gave the goldfish their provender, and some fresh water, and arranged the flowers in their bowl. The flowers were nothing more refined than a market bunch that she bought for herself. Jeremy Dand did not court by means of flowers, and Amy up till now had never cared much for them. Her curious new appreciation of such romantic things coincided with the new phase of temperament on which she had entered. She neatly mended a rent in the flounce of her dress, and put on a sailor hat that she had trimmed for herself. She let herself out of the house, crossed the river, and entered the great church, to think.

The verger pointed her to a place. She formed one of a discreet and reverent row, labelled F, while her eyes rested on a card hung on a diagonally marked pillar to signify that the Anthem would be No. 136. Nearly all the other persons in the pew were women, and wore black, and their spines were reverently pliable. It did not occur to Amy to suppose that some of them would have been averse to worshipping in her company, if they had known? She herself did not feel wicked or stained, but worried, so much so that she forgot to come off her knees now and then, posing either as the most devout among them all, or the one with 'something on her conscience.'

There was no reason why she should feel wicked, her

action had been ugly and premature at the worst. She was as good as a married woman, to give in to their code. Her lover would marry her soon, as soon as he decently could. According to the most lax interpretation of the strict social regimen, a year, or at least six months, should elapse before a widower takes unto himself a second wife. But if Jeremy Dand, in obedience to a higher necessity, married her at once, there would be an outcry, people would be shocked to death at such blatant cynicism and unblushing indecency. There is no need to hurt people's feelings; morality in the main must give way to morality in detail. Jeremy of course did not believe, any more than she did, that their union, temporary or permanent, could be sanctified or affirmed in any way by a few words of municipal or priestly blessing, but she knew that he lazily preferred, as a rule, to comply with all superficial social requirements. There are advantages connected with the due fulfilment of the world's fanciful laws, and incommensurate penalties attaching to their neglect. She did not doubt it in the least, marriage, if she so willed it, lay in front of her, and her cowed inadequate heart did not leap.

The Magnificat! Amy rose.

Until now, her horizon had been physically limited and cribbed in by the heavily clad, muffled group of which she formed part; when she stood up, the spirit that bore up the spacious aisles of the vast cathedral seemed to descend upon her, and she lost sight of personality and merged her sordid self-searchings in the larger whole of speculation. Aided by the rolling periods of the organ music, she apprehended in some sort the very essence of the faith that animated this sparse remnant, which still politely answered to the spur of bygone ideas. Once, she realized, these ideas had been powerful to sway nearly the whole world. Now it was a pigmy audience composed chiefly of women the

bearers of the burden, who mustered under the shelter of the mighty reliquary raised by soaring belief, and the fear of the consequences of unbelief. Brief candles made an oasis of light for them round their diminished humbled altar, and gas jets clustering round the Byzantine pillars aided their modern astygmatic eyes to grope in pigmy primers of vile print, for the ill understood, but revered formulæ of antique ceremonial. Amy's irreverent fancies ran away with her. At one moment she conceived of the patient kneeling group, muttering softly words of terror and awe, as a small exiguous soul subsisting, maimed and thin, in a mansion too large for it, faintly alive under the over-arching case of the extinct mammoth of faith. She pictured the immense roof as the ribs of the monster, haggard, stark, but of the noble proportions that architects agree to praise. The coloured paintings that had once decked out the frigid stonework, long since faded and withered off, symbolized the red tracks and veinings of blood that had fed the flesh on its bones. Jeremy Dand, her professor in these matters, had trained her to see and appreciate the beautiful lines of the building, but he had not taught her to humanize it, like a child, as she was doing.

For the rest of the time she spent within these walls, the twin conceptions of the moribund faith, and the puny love, ran side by side in the stream of her thoughts. The chanting of the Psalms, like a protesting murmur of panic-stricken survival, shot through ever and anon with low growlings of resentment at the inadequacy of the emotion that accompanied them, was the cry of her starved soul capacity also. One lady, so obviously sinless, sitting next to Amy, with, as she thought, a great look of Edith Dand, continued to pipe out, mildly unmusically, in tones that had as it were no body, the memorable terms of self-abasement invented by the sinner David. . . .

In the interlude, comparatively unemotional, of the Lesson, some pedantic aphorisms of poor Edith Dand's came back to Amy's mind, induced by her neighbour's strong resemblance. With the temporary cessation of the music, the chord of feelings awakened by it had relaxed, as in a bow you let out a notch or two, and the tension is relieved.

How often had she listened to Edith Dand, with all the emphasis of a weak nature asseverating that Love is enough, that Love ennobles everything, that a single-minded, honest manifestation of that important passion redeems all errors, excesses and aberrations committed by its votaries. And the poor lady really meant it. There was the test cast of Annie Dawes, which she brought forward on every opportunity. She had actually taken back a bad servant on these very grounds, and had maintained her infant for her. But—and here Amy considered closely—what kind of love was it that Edith recognized, or thought she recognized? In her own opinion the very highest kind; she always went in for the best, so bought the finest flour and ordered the best beef for her household needs. But Amy fancied that the limitations of Edith's own temperament had led her into a common error. It is, in point of fact, the more sensual variety of love over which the Mrs. Dands of society are willing to throw their mantle of charity. Their tolerance is a concomitant of the perfunctory reading of Omar, and Bernard Shaw and a few popularized volumes of science. Kind fashionable women, when they speak of pure redeeming love, are really thinking of something quite different. Edith certainly was, in the case of her dear Dawes, who had betrayed herself a mere uncritical village wanton a short while afterwards.

Amy, as a technical question, was yet unable to decide under which category to place her own feeling for Jeromy, if indeed its volume entitled it to be enrolled in either.

Even Lady Meadrow, incapable of any but material emotions, was never weary of declaring that she could forgive any woman of her set going wrong for Love. She had been used to declare that she was prepared to call upon them in their moral and social destitution if it was fully understood that the overmastering desire for the tenderness of one particular man whom they would be glad and ready to marry on the spot if possible, had been their undoing. The pressure of bridge debts—even that strong motive was inadmissible! And one life—one love—of course! Amy nearly laughed when she recalled the old flirt's fashionable tritenesses.

The Lesson was over. A prayer. Amy went down, down, asking no blessing of some divine power, but profanely probing the insoluble problem of her feeling for the man to whom she had given herself. Had she even the excuse of love—love under whatever name?

She did not know. Even those two worldly empty-headed women whose wisdom she had cited could have given her points. What was the silly simple element in it that they would admit and that she missed? Missed always, forever, possibly, and yet she was living the life of love.

The hot tears rushed into her eyes as she knelt, and prayed. She prayed for light, the light of love, not of religion. She knew that she ought to have been turned out, for she was a woman venturing to face her own horrible material life problem in a place of spiritual worship.

Oh, to know the truth! What was she? A sinner, a fool, or an invalid? Why was she here, on her knees in a church? How had she come to be Jeremy Dand's mistress? Answer? answer, the Thing folk pray to?

Why, as in the seclusion, the smarting dark of pressed-in eye-balls, she knelt with her face dipped deep in her

straining hands, did she see, not Jeremy, nor Edith, nor even Erinna, but the human agent of a little puny emotion that had touched her life once, and then gone out of it? She was standing again on a white glistening road, as she had stood on a cold seaside morning more than eight years ago, and ardent childish lips were pressed to hers and a boyish figure strained to her body, till she could feel the sobs of true anguish wrung from the lad of sixteen at the idea of losing her even for a season.

She heard again his 'Good-bye, darling—darling—darling!' The voice that echoed in her ears all down the years, had been young, rich, searching in quality, yet pure like those voices that sounded now from the choir of Blois. It was the purity—the immaturity of it that she loved to think upon. It was in her love for this simple lad, now cold in the grave she had cruelly prophesied for him to his own mother, that she must look for a definition of her own capacity for passion. The devotion of a mere child, and yet his was the only love that had ever made her happy, and even unhappy in the sweet, poignant, easily-to-be-comforted way! All the thoughts connected with that episode were white, suave, and softly echoing through the long halls of fancy.

Once, when she had been a girl at school, an enterprising teacher had instituted comparisons between Keats 'Nightingale' and Shelley's 'Skylark.' Amy had preferred the 'Skylark,' giving as her reason that she could not breathe in the other's lush and stifling paradise. The open! The clear! The free! The close atmosphere of passion was not for her. 'It means I am anæmic!' she thought brutally. 'It is blood that makes emotion. Oh, if I knew?'

She rose for the anthem. Her prayer as before seemed to be answered when the music began. In shifting gleams

of sensibility it came to her; she felt for a moment as if she knew all, could solve everything. She must make haste and think it all out before the music stopped again. The boy Philip—or someone like him, it did not matter—was singing alone. Her intelligence crept after his voice into the chancel and was focussed, fascinated by the sense of light and air dispensed from thence. All the wrack of the time passed with the other man, lay behind her in the dark soft gloom in the rear of the church. She seemed to be disengaging herself from it, trampling it under as something noxious, noisome, lying under her feet, a reeking swamp that she had come through, and deplored, and would fain forget.

So she continued to gaze from her place at the glorious confusion of the lighted chancel, the soul of the service, the radiating rose of the carefully elaborated mystery of awe which meant religion to her. Awe and beauty! Neither sense had ever been cultivated in Amy. But now she was in a mood to be impressed by the whiteness of surplices covering over the workaday clothing of vulgar mortal man, the strange dim colours of the tessellated floor flared in her eyes, as they traversed it on their way to the twinkling blinking altar and the basket of flushed waxen roses that crowned it. There, by the altar rails, she and her lover whom she did not love, would kneel! . . .

What right had they to take petty, vamped-up passion, mere physical need of authorized human companionship and sympathy, and lay it here on this august starting point for noble aspirations, and altitudes undreamed of, and undesired by them? How should they presume to approach and deposit their grotesque sum of earthly love at the foot of the cross of pain and crave a blessing on it—if power of blessing there be? She was not decrying love in the main, poor Peri cast out of Para-

dise! Some loves doubtless have the soaring quality, and can share in and form part of the Unknowable, Unthinkable, Unattainable that is reputed to rest there, 'high up in the dustiness of the apse'—but not hers and his! . .

How poor and mean that seemed as revealed by his speeches, and her reception of them! A love that one could die for, perhaps, might pass muster, but she knew well that he did not, would not propose to die for her. Nor did she feel as if she could lay down her life for him? . . .

No, she would not be able. The old safe test of voluntary substitution in death failed as soon as she applied it. Something, that when it came to the point, would have egged her on to the last sublimity, was not in her. Only the whole-souled love of Alcestis, so she realised, might venture to stand there at the altar along with Faith that moves mountains, love that breaks locks, because it is prepared, to scale the heights of self-sacrifice.

Jeremy and she had no right to seek a chrism such as this for a union that was the mere result of propinquity, to ask for the endorsement of a selfish bond of mutual convenience, there, where great and enduring loves knelt to pray and become one with divinity.

She considered her squalid honeymoon! A woman struck dumb, helpless, doddering in a dream of horror, plucked from a welter of burning iron and flesh, drugged by large draughts of unbearable torment witnessed in her own despite, and torn forthwith through the gates of a material paradise, lifted, insensate, sheer into the smiling realms of Cythera! She had been all unprepared, a moral invalid, not a joyful bride. Her smarting eyeballs seared by a long vision of agony, she had stared unheeding at the pale lovelight she had kindled in a man's eyes, and had fallen to him, weakly, feebly, uninterested even in her own undoing. . . .

She saw as in a vision the body of his wife, the unconscious agent that had united them, lying cast aside, like a useless tool. . . . For indeed, she had come to think of Edith, by this time, as her splendid solemn rival, all her tiresome little ways and grimaces sublimated by death.

'I ought to have seen her once, only once, *after!*'

She repeated this to herself. She was sure that if she had seen the dead body of the woman she had despoiled, shorn of the honours of patient, respectful marital grief, ruthlessly mulcted of all rites of ceremonial loss, she would never have been able to follow that woman's husband on to a new lease of co-existence.

'Oh, what am I going to do—what am I going to do? If I only could die before he comes back!'

The voluntary was rolling out. She was still on her knees.

The verger touched her on the shoulder.

'Staying for the Communion, Miss?'

'No, no!' she exclaimed with exaggerated horror, and fled.

CHAPTER XXXIV

In the course of the afternoon she went back to the cathedral, and heard the evening service. It was good, it stimulated her ideas. She could think best while half-listening to something of an entirely different tendency. The intelligent verger, remembering one of her speeches to Mr. Dand on the day they did the complete round together, hardly knew what to make of her present devoted attitude? Her sad self-conscious face had won him, she seemed a nice young lady. After the service he volunteered to lift the lids of the wooden oubliettes that had been recently made in the stone flooring behind the altar to show the foundations of the early Saxon church. Amy did not care about them, but what was the use of rebutting any form of kindness? She idly led him on to talk about himself. He had the civil hesitating address of an honest, self-respecting man.

'Yes, Miss, I used to be a strong chapel goer. I don't know how, Miss, but I seemed to get out of touch with them, seemingly. Not that I took my valooable self anywhere else. I don't worship anywhere now. Somehow, Miss—I can't tell you—but so long I have been about this here building, and knowing all about its beginnings—leastways I mustn't say that, but Mr. Dand he tells me, and I listen to every word! I've been verger here now these ten years. Poking about these here stones, and wondering how and when they was placed and the order of them—so many alterations!—it fair puts you out—I don't seem able to believe in anything!' His voice sank to a dispirited whisper.

'I understand how that is!' Amy whispered too, and had the tact to say good-evening, without offering him a shilling for his lost convictions.

In the constant study of minutiæ the educated verger had forfeited his sense of proportion; while considering each stone individually, he had lost hold of the idea to whose honour and glory the whole fabric had been raised. He had got into the habit of playing with stones, as Mr. Dand juggled with words.

Home she went and had her tea—a fulsome North country tea with hot girdle cakes and a cosy on the tea-pot. There was nothing meretricious about it, or about her sad, sour, but kindly landlady, either. Mrs. Gray of 20 North Street was the widow of a railway porter, and had two children to clothe and feed and send to school. She realized that she had secured two quiet clients who would pay regularly and to whom nods and winks would be unacceptable. They seemed careful people. So she was careful of their property. She placed the bottle of champagne they had left unfinished, in the chiffonier well corked, and bottom up, so as to preserve the remainder to their use, as she explained to the languid Amy. She was concerned to identify the two napkin rings every day. She may have believed that she was entertaining a pair of lovers, but she behaved as if they were the stolidest and longest united of married couples. She was impressed by her lodger's two trips to church, where one of her boys had seen her. Yes, she was a very nice landlady and did not pander to Amy's sense of romance or adventure in any way.

And the result of this tame, calm environment was, that except that she had no work to do, nothing wherewith to occupy herself, and check her horrid faculty of introspection, the abandoned girl might just as well have been living

her usual life at home. She knew instinctively that she herself was not, in the main, much changed. The curiously resilient creatures women are! In the old days when one of her girl friends had married, she had always, on receiving a letter dated from 'Heaven'—alias Paris or Folkestone, in the honeymoon, expected to find the handwriting a little subtly altered; she had always looked for small differences, when she met them for the first time on their return. And that she had always been disappointed, she was forced to admit. She herself, was another case in point. She was the same Amy, a little less self-confident, maybe, and certainly less arrogant, less lively.

'A very quiet lady,' the landlady reported to the equally quiet friend from next door sitting below stairs, with whom she settled down for her good Sunday gossip when she had removed the tea things in the parlour and swept the tablecloth free of the few crumbs that Amy, hearth-goddess as ever, had carefully abstained from making. Mrs. Gray offered to bring the lighted lamp up: this Amy refused, saying she would ring presently, but preferred to sit in the gloaming awhile. To tell the truth the lamp smelt. Tragedy is often spoken in terms of prose.

Just before Mrs. Gray left the room, however, Amy raised her head, and enquired if there was such a thing in the house as a cat?

'I can't pet a bowl of gold fish, can I?' she said in her pretty light way that made her social inferiors love her, and the sour landlady eager to procure for her the cat that was not.

'I am so sorry, Miss—Ma'am, but the last we had went away. I expect he got himself pisened in the gardens down the bank, Miss. They do put a lot of carbolic down there. It's bad for cats and we can't keep them more than a few weeks. They all get their death on the banks. You'll

ring, Miss, if you want anything? I'm quite near hand, in the kitchen, so you've no call to go and feel lonely.'

Amy was left to the survey of those wild dank uncared-for gardens stretching down to the river under the parapet of the street, with the added distress of possible decaying feline bodies, scattered about among the grimy bushes? The evening had closed in early. The heavens had joined the earth in a clammy alliance of ground exhalations and falling rain. The Cathedral seemed to loom the vaster and the more austere by reason of the concealment of its base by the uprising clouds of rain returning in mists to the sky whence they came. It seemed a fabric of unaccountable origin, half human. . . . Amy shivered, and perversely saw it, not as a beautiful, benign conception and performance of the great mediæval Bishop Adhemar, but as some mighty Frankenstein monster, sentient, malevolent, full of the austere cruelty of the ages of faith that reared it. It seemed to her now to be crouching, now drawing itself up threateningly, in sickening alternation. She could fancy, again and again, that great blind mass lunging forward for some deed of stupid brutality. Like all man-made monsters, it would be sure to be stupid? . . .

She continued to stare at it fixedly, and it did begin to seem horridly near—to be coming nearer—ready to fall over her. . . . It was surely top heavy? . . . . What did it stand on? It tottered. . . . Her body swayed in unwilling unison. . . .

She must not look at it. The valley, with the river Duren flowing between, that once protected her in a way, seemed abolished. There was nothing between her and the monster she had evolved from her sick thoughts. . . . The chill sweat of the fear of death broke over her. She cast a terrified glance over her shoulder into the recesses

of the little room at her back. She was quite alone, the door shut! Jeremy! Where was Jeremy? . . . Oh gone, she had sent him away! . . . She would *not* ring the bell for help. If she could not have Jeremy to comfort and sustain her, she would have no one.

She dared not take her eyes off the view framed by the window. But she sat quite still, and steadfastly barred the hideous image reflected on her eyeballs from penetrating to her sense, and so gained calm and a reasonable view of things. She managed at last by an effort of will to right herself, and the feeling of vertigo left her. She was able at last to look at the dumb inorganic block of masonry opposite unwinkingly, yes, she stared Adhemar's vast construction down. Why, it had not moved! What a fool she had been for a space! But she was all right now.

She plumed herself on her courage, cold, and shaking all over as she still was. A child would have been really frightened. She would have had to draw the curtains and shut it out for Erinna, who was only a child . . . a dear child. . . . Oh, for the dear child's hand in hers! Her own empty palm ached for the contact. She was going to be ill, surely—she felt very strange. . . .

Pah! She would go, upstairs, to her room and look at her furs which had arrived more than a week ago. She had not worn them yet. It was too early in the year, and the weather was too rainy. Damp spoils fur. All very well, but she had a curious fateful idea that she never would wear them at all. Ill-gotten gains! . . .

The best thing to do would be to get the coat, and put it on now, and sit in it a while. It was nearly cold enough. That would destroy the spell? . . . Rather a childish trick! No, she would not give in to it. She would wear her furs the first day of October, and make a point of it.

Certainly, if she were to decide to leave Jeremy, she would not think it correct to carry the furs he had given off with her, somehow? People—decent people—always send back wedding presents, if possible, when the wedding is put off, or is not to take place. But *did* she mean to leave Jeremy, and go where cathedrals and all the vested powers of the world might fall on her and admonish her and put her down? Leaving Jeremy meant beginning again and she was not sure that her vitality would lend itself to another struggle with society? She was frightened now, of the forces that are arrayed against the outsider, the wanderer, the lost woman. She was now, in effect, what her enemies would imply her to be, an adventuress, a doubtful character. She had not managed to 'keep herself respectable.' That meant little to her, but everything to most people. It would stand fatally in her way for the future, it would invalidate the bold front which was half her battle; though she had nothing to be ashamed of, she would henceforth have something to conceal.

Should she not rather, cease to struggle and consent to lose her identity by joining her life to that of Jeremy? Should she not thankfully accept his love, his care, his furs, and all the rest of it, and give him—give him what women do give in return for an establishment. He would not complain, even if her service was faintly rendered. He wanted her, *tel-quel;* he wanted to marry her. So much for Jeremy. His intentions were honourable. But for herself, she felt keenly that although the famous blessing should have been pronounced over them, and their contract fully ratified by laws human, and divine, if you like, she would be no better than his heartless, mercenary mistress, accepting benefits and paying for them in the usual coin. For she knew that she did not, could not love

him. She used a little test. She had been his utterly, but she had never yet kissed him of her own accord, or desired him to kiss her. One little, valid, binding kiss she could not give, and yet remain a true woman!

He did not notice it; he was strangely simple in some things. The innocent Amy could give him points.

She could be everything to him, a splendid, devoted, faithful mate, while to her he would represent just an anchorage, a hand held out in the world's puzzling darkness, an efficient panacea for loneliness, the loneliness which she felt she could bear never more, after this short taste of it.

'Oh, what have I done to be so miserable?' she cried aloud, in savage world-anger. 'I have done no one any wrong. None. No one. Edith is dead. I belong to no one, but the man I have given myself to. Hastily. That's all. I am not wicked. I am not! But here I am, crying, all alone on a Sunday afternoon, in a lodging house by myself! I am calling out for comfort, I who was meant to be with people, comforting them and looking after them! Why did he bring me here, why did he put me into this? I am not his, I am no one's. It is all wrong . . . wretchedly mistaken . . . not me. . . .'

Her head declined, the heavy plait that crowned it fell forward over her forehead, and she did not trouble to push it back into its place, but let it helplessly weigh her head down. She wept, the poor courtesan, launched, willy-nilly on the wide seas of pleasure! She wept for rage, for moral isolation in her strange surroundings, for uncertainty, for the sense of unmerited doom that pressed on her. She wept like a child resenting an unjust punishment.

Good Mrs. Gray had not contemplated this briny flood, but she had been careful to place an old tablecloth under

the bowl of gold fish to preserve her good marquetry work-table. So, though Amy's salt tears fell heartily, they could not injure its blurred, drowned roses, and watery suggestions of leafage. The gold fish in the wide glass bowl swam round and round happily. They seemed to boo and baa at Amy, with their oval mouths. . . .

The weather had cleared. A crisp clean evening! The flagged pavement of North Street echoed with the footsteps of decent burgesses, taking their Sunday evening's stroll after the rain. The stilled Sabbath voices of good children came up to her—the meretricious woman above, brooding alone in the gathering dusk by her own wish. On the threshold, just below the window Mrs. Gray stood, uttering a quiet good-bye to the crony of years who lived a few doors higher up the street, and who had been sitting with her for an hour instead of walking about. As she went away, though Amy did not hear, she mentioned Mrs. Gray's lodger, commenting on her queer fancy for sitting upstairs alone in the gathering dark? No trouble she was, said Mrs. Gray. A nice quiet body. Her name? Mrs. Gray said it was Wilson. Mr. Wilson was away this Sunday. Yes, very clear after the rain. Quite 'got out!' Good-night!

CHAPTER XXXV

Amy sat quite still in the window seat next day, and heard Jeremy's tread booming on the flagged street. She supposed it was his for she did not especially recognize it, but very few people passed along North Street; it led nowhere; it was only the best view of the cathedral. His step on the stair did not excite her, nor his kiss, which she sweetly, demurely returned, since to refuse it would lead to premature discussion.

'Dear Amy, I am so glad to see you again. Are you?'

'Delighted.'

He laughed. 'What a society answer! But I am not going to worry myself any more about you. Your attitude just gives me discomfort, not grounds for anxiety. It only means the strong revulsion that women are apt to feel—you hate the sight of your master. Am I not your master?'

'In a sense—yes.'

He sat down and took her hand. 'Yet sometimes I begin to think I have not really got you, not as much as I should like to suppose. You elude me. I wish I could read you? You see I can be honest too. . . . No matter, it will come in time. Why have you got your hat on?'

'Because I was just going out.'

'Then you would have missed me, whom you have forced to come back for you on a good working morning. You contemplate it calmly! Well, shall we go together? Come for a turn on the motor. We must walk to it. I left it at the garage.'

'Naturally,' said she sensibly. 'It would never do to bring it up here—identify us at once. Besides it wouldn't even go on these cobble stones.'

'Well, dearest, will you use it or no?'

'No.'

'Was it me or the motor you shuddered at?'

'I wouldn't ask if I were you. Say no more about it, it will be wiser.'

'I would be wise. What shall I do to please you?'

'Take me for a walk. Take me to St. Gundred's. I have been reading that book about the dissolution of the monasteries.'

'Seven miles? That would tire you out.'

'Why not?'

'This is awful. Well, we will go. But I must eat first. It is one o'clock.'

Amy rang, ordered lunch, and watched him eat. She had had a glass of milk at eleven. She sat at the opposite side of the table with her little hardworked hands propping her face. She was doggedly pensive. Dand disliked a woman to be coolly thoughtful in his presence almost as much as he objected to see her sewing in the same distinguished company. He made several attempts to distract her, but in vain, and a slight residue of huff was perceptible in his manner when having lunched he rose, threw away his napkin, lit a cigarette, and said, like a schoolboy, 'Come on.'

'May I kiss you?' he asked solemnly, holding the door open for her.

'I will suffer it,' she replied lightly. She was thinking of something else.

'I remember something you once said in that connection,' he remarked as they walked down the street together —he was still angry. 'Another theory of yours. I see

of course, that you merely tolerate the—lighter tokens of my affection. The day, Amy, when you admit to the lust of kissing, I may take it, may I not, that you, my mistress, have acquired some little love for me?'

'Quite true!' she said, looking yearningly across at the cathedral. He had noticed the test, then!

'A woman then—I ask for purposes of information?—can manage to live with the man she does not love and be everything to him—yet only suffer patiently what we may call the small change of passion? Have I got you right?'

'Yes,' she answered composedly, a little hurt by his antagonistic attitude. 'The greater need not, as you insinuate, include the less. The lust to kiss, as you call it, is an infallible proof of true love—with me at least. I can perfectly conceive of an honest woman's marrying a rich man for his money and so on, and being a good amenable wife to him in the ordinary sense, while feeling herself quite unable to kiss him and little things like that that nothing but love excuses and that you simply can't bring yourself to do unless you *are* in love.'

'You are a most strange woman. Unsatisfactory, rather—but charming, very!'

'I don't mean to be.'

'Don't mean to be charming?'

'No. I meant, if anything, to be unsatisfactory.'

'Yes, and you succeed. You have developed all the arts of the adventuress while I have been away. What have you been doing with yourself?'

'Nothing very wicked. Going to church, and talking to the verger. His name's Verrall. He says being about the church so much has made a pagan of him.'

'Disillusioned him, eh? A very common thing with experts! The more he knows of Gothic, the more he loses

sight of the *raison d'être* of Gothic. But I, who have picked open his mind with my trowel of doubt, I shouldn't be surprised if I was to die a good Catholic.'

They motored to St. Gundred's after all and did the seven miles in fifteen minutes. The pace reminded Amy of the night of her abduction. The clinging clematis in the hedges of the narrow lanes that led to the priory, seemed, as they had done then, to reach out their tendrils to arrest her. But she was better now—the three weeks she had spent in Blois as Mrs. Wilson had done her good, and as the fresh air poured into her lungs, it stimulated her brain, and made her feel apt for effort, strong to say what had to be said, and do what had to be done.

They drew up on the little green that comprised St. Gundred's once holy domain. The clever old monks seemed, as usual, to have chosen the only possible site for miles, a level dell of fat pasture land sheltered in the arm of the river, with high cliffs opposing on the other side. The caretaker's cottage, built out of the derelict stones of the abbey, occupied one side of the green, and down to the water's edge, the forlorn ruins dotted the other in their sad draggled way. It was peace, perfect peace, the peace of renunciation and failure. The grey light slept on the haggard central arch, the murmur of the Duren was sweetly audible as soon as the snorting puffing creature that had brought them hither, was safely stabled in the adjacent shed.

The custodian, a motherly ample woman, who entertained shy lovers all through the week and roaring breakloads on holidays, waddled down her miniature garden walk at the sounds of their approach, and now took their order for tea to be laid in the little room where the death watch ticked by day, full of the scent of mould and with the broken spinet in the corner. Mr. Dand

gaily alluded to these advantages. It was to be ready in ten minutes. Meantime they wandered down to the bank of the river, and Amy sat down on a low stone, at which he demurred.

'Dare you sit down? It is late in the year. Change! Here's a wooden stump—safer!'

Amy for once appreciated being looked after, and obeyed.

'What makes the trees look black instead of green?' she asked, 'and the water seems whipped up into knife blades? Iron-grey tones in everything!'

'Sympathy with your mood, I suppose, and a touch of east wind.'

'My mood?'

'It's a black one. A mood in which you hate me, at least, I am sure you don't love me.'

Her startled face looked up at his. 'You guess?'

'I said a mood, Amy,' he replied, almost sternly, 'and I hope I know enough of your sex to be able to make allowance for moods.'

'You are very kind. But suppose it is a permanent one?'

'We'll see!' he said grimly, pulling her veil that the wind had caught and torn from its moorings, back into its place on her hat.

'Oh, don't,' she cried. 'I hate anybody to touch my head. I am like a cat when you touch its whiskers.'

'Nerves again?'

'No, not nerves, Jeremy, my clear and unbiassed knowledge of myself. I have brought you here to-day to say it. Please listen kindly, as if I were a subordinate at the works giving up his place. Jeremy, you have described my mood accurately, I am sorry to say, and it is to be lasting. I don't love you, I never shall love you, and we

ought certainly to part. It would be indecent to go on like this. We have no sanction for living together, according to me.'

Jeremy Dand laughed, long and loud, till the echoes of the old abbey rang again. There was a nervous quality about his laughter which she was too excited to apprehend. She was hurt by his levity.

'You laugh! You laugh! And yet you have always known how I think of these things. You know that I consider that when two people really love each other, no power on earth, no bonds of ill-advised marriage, need keep them apart, but on the other hand, nothing should induce them to remain together in a state of sexual servitude if that sanction is not there. There's where the impropriety comes in, to me. I like—I have a right to be taken seriously. Yet you laugh?'

Dand muttered something incoherent. He was not ready with his answer. She resumed:

'Do you know what your laugh means to me? You are saying, "Well, here's a good one! Been to me—what she has been, and now wants to pretend"—Oh how can a man laugh!'

'Dear, I beg your pardon,' he said at last, 'and I assure you you are wrong for once! I laughed because I had, as it were, temporarily lost the power of inhibition, my brain refused to send out the appropriate manifestation of my sentiments. I should not know hot from cold now. . . . Amy, I feel for you what most people call love, passionate love, and do give me credit for having the generosity to admit it, in the face of your awful and sudden attack on the very seat of my reason and my vanity. It is a man's whole mature life and being that you propose to deal with and overthrow in a twopenny halfpenny mood of remorse or what not, that you ought

to be ashamed of entertaining—and will be in an hour. You are ill, I know, you have been sorely tried, you are not yourself, for it isn't like you to give careless expression to a mere passing emotion, a *tic* of the brain, a missed cylinder! . . .'

'Yes, you are disappointed in me. I know I am acting out of character. Perhaps my character is changing? But I know I mean what I say and I have thought it over for long. I can't help your man's vanity, that you say I have injured. It must take its chance. Remember you left me——'

'At your own request,' he interrupted. 'How feminine to reproach me! Well, I prefer you to be feminine, it's a good sign.'

'I am not so much feminine, as business-like,' she said sadly. 'I asked you two days ago to leave me quite alone —to stand clear and let me focus things properly. I wanted to learn myself, find out what I was and what I wanted and what line I should take to keep me true to us both. I suspected myself, if you know what I mean.'

'I do. You were desirous of groping about in your mental and moral reserves, you wished to go on exploiting yourself, discovering fresh moods and allowing them to dominate you. I know your moods, and their explanation, better than you do yourself. My physiological knowledge tells me that this phase of your mentality—let's be scientific!—this mood that disturbs you so much, is a perfectly natural one, born of enforced idleness. Have you ever been so idle since the day you were born? It it merely the back wash of a great emotion that has altered and changed you forever. You ought not to have taken any notice of it. You should have sat on it—snubbed it, for it isn't a valid excuse for not loving me. . . . There's the inn-woman calling to us to come in and have

tea. Let us go! We can finish this discussion inside, if you care to. Come.'

'I am glad she interrupted us,' said Amy, 'for you had simply taken to bullying me, at the last.'

'Possibly,' said he smiling down at her. 'Come, dear contrary angel!'

Amy took hold of the hand he extended to her as if she was a child, and suffered herself to be led in the direction of the cottage. She was conscious of a sudden warmth of liking for him, and feared dreadfully that it was because, as she said, he had been bullying her. Almost reluctantly, she was forced to abandon the mutual pose of alliance to walk single file. The narrow garden walk bordered with cockleshells that led to the door made it imperative. The custodian stood on the threshold, a vast circumambient apron with a kind smile of like dimensions brooding over it. She was so used to lovers.

'Here ye coom!' she cried. 'And a neece hot girdle cake I've made for ye!'

They smiled and promised to do justice to it. The door of the musty damp little room was closed on them. Amy poured out tea, handing him his cup with an almost maternal air, her eyes resting on this man she was determined to throw over, tenderly.

For she felt that the sudden unexpected efflorescence of strong regard that had surged up in her, made it difficult for her to combat him in the interests of the position she had adopted and which she knew to be a well considered and permanent one. A cruel ultimatum, delivered from the citadel, to a courteous and delightful enemy without, with the underknowledge that some part, at least, of the outer walls of the fortress were cracking. It was hideously complicated. Man-like, he correctly interpreted only a portion of the signalling, and fancied

the fortress meant complete surrender. He sought her hand among the teacups:

'Amy, my mistress, my love, are you not a little ashamed of your backsliding just now?'

She shook her head, and tried to speak quietly, without any distracting signs of the emotion she felt.

'I meant what I said, Jeremy. I suppose, like everyone else, I am built in compartments. In some of them, I don't deny it, there is a breach, but the main one is quite—how shall I say it?—quite love-tight. I don't love you enough to go on living with you, that's the plain truth. Perhaps to comfort your vanity—you own to vanity!—you may say that the faculty of love is half atrophied in me. I don't know!'

She used her habitual phrase with a sad little toss of the head.

'Perhaps I saw life and sad ugly, earnest things, too early and too much. Other things than love have always seemed more important to me—the need for bread—a roof over one's head and so on. And I have no mysticism. You have often told me so. The power to love strongly goes with that, with the religious instinct. I thought so the other day in the cathedral.'

'By Jove!' he exclaimed, effectively discouraged. 'You are a damned little theorizer. It is the only thing that makes me think you are perhaps right. Women who love can't theorize.'

'No, and I don't really seem to know you, Jeremy. I have never been able to set up that freemasonry that lovers do—real lovers, I mean. I feel quite shy about using your Christian name, and when I hear your step on the stairs my heart doesn't move one bit the faster. I don't long to touch your hand or your cheek. I never dream of you——'

'Oh, for God's sake, stop this enumeration of my failures to touch your imagination?' he cried irritably. 'And do you know what you are doing? You are killing my remorse, you are letting me out, taking one load off my mind at least, and putting another on. Amy, listen to me! We have sinned and suffered together. I cannot let you go.'

'You will have to,' she said sadly. 'Be nice about it, dear, can't you? Treat me like a man. Don't encourage me to behave like a woman.'

'And don't you encourage me to be a cad!' He strode away from her neighbourhood, his eyes rested almost with dislike on this little quiet girl who was defying him, Jeremy Dand, the King of Oldfort. He spoke coldly.

'Why should you want to deprive me of the privilege of making you the only reparation in my power? I swear I meant to do it, it is so easy, nowadays.'

'You mean marry me,' said Amy, contemptuously. 'But marriage would make things no better, from my point of view. Haven't you understood me? If I loved you, I shouldn't care twopence whether you married me or not!'

'That is as well!' said he, flinging his hat that he had just taken up down violently on the spinet and seizing the handle of the door. 'For I couldn't manage it. My wife isn't dead.'

Amy raised her head with a jerk and looked him full in the face. There was no expression in her eyes. That was what calmed him. His hand fell, and his jaw. . . .

'Go and pay for the tea,' she said.

. . . . .

When Mr. Dand came back Amy had resumed her gloves. She handed him his hat. They went out.

'So that was what your remorse meant, poor Jeremy!'

she said, gently when they were clear of the cottage. 'Why did you deceive me?'

He answered sullenly: 'I wasn't sure—or rather, I was practically sure. The doctor said there wasn't one chance in a thousand that she would ever regain consciousness. I came straight out of the house after getting his verdict, and I saw you sitting there, helpless, silly with horror and shock, without a soul to look after you. Edith was dying—practically dead—in the cottage inside. I looked upon you as mine, even then. You health was the point, your recovery was my business and no one else's. I put you in the motor and carried you off to a Nursing Home and told them all that I had done so. Then I came back to Edith and was told she had rallied in a marvellous way. I never expected it. You won't believe me, but I was glad. We couldn't move her—not for another month. I turned the people out of the cottage and put in nurses. . . . It was a long business. I saw you both every day, sandwiched you two women—and did my work as well. Neither of you had any cause to complain of want of attention, but it about finished me. My nerves went completely. I moved her. Then it was a question of moving you, giving you a change. You stupidly, dearest, asked me outright to come to you at Blois, in your innocence, I see now. I thought then—— You gave me all sorts of absurd reasons for not needing chaperonage. You rather defied me. Your coldness, that you were so proud of, angered me. That and my discovery that you thought my wife was dead settled the matter. I suppose that idea of yours did modify your attitude towards me a bit in spite of your theories of free sexual union? I ought, of course, to have put you right about Edith's recovery then, but I didn't. It gave me a sort of shock when I found you thought she was cleared out of our

way and I got from that moment, a hazy sort of plan of turning your mistake to my own profit and your loss. Though, I gave you a chance even after that, you remember. I asked you if you wouldn't like the old ladies to come and see you. That would have prevented it, of course. Well, you declined politely. You played my game—the seducer's game. Now you know it all—the reprehensible way in which the molecules of my brain chose to adjust themselves. I can't help it. Well, then, Blois! I came—you were sweet—and I conquered. Cæsar was a cad, but we're all like him. I took you, and I'm not sorry.'

'Nor am I,' she said honestly and kindly. 'It was rather my own fault, as you say. Is—she quite recovered now, then?'

'She sat up yesterday for the first time.'

'Ah, well, well! . . . Do get the car, won't you, and let us go back to Blois.' She urged with sudden impatience.

'Amy, forgive me!'

'Yes, of course, only let us get back. I am so suddenly tired. It is tiring work, thrashing out things!'

'Poor, dear Amy!' He took her hand for a moment after they had got into the car, until his own were claimed by the imperative wheel.

The desolate fragments of the home of the Cistercian monks seemed to crowd round them and complain of injustice, as they slowly steamed across the Priory Green up the hilly field track that led to the gate of the domain. Amy leaned round and looked back at the ruins.

'Look!' she said, 'never a slate between them and the cruel rain that wears them away! Something more important than our affairs was thrashed out there and came to grief a few hundred years ago. In the face of

all that, lying useless off the track, like a great engine derailed, I cannot somehow, feel as if I mattered so very much.'

'Amy, you are going mad. Engines off the line, indeed! You are off the line yourself. Why did I ever bring you to Blois? That did it. You'll leave me and become a Catholic. . . . Of course you matter, you little fool, you matter intensely, you are a bit of good stuff, you must not be lost. Perhaps you are thinking that I am hardly in a position to give myself airs of patronage? Does your disagreeable silence mean that?'

'Is my silence offensive? I don't mean it to be. I have had a shock.'

'Ah, you admit it! You are human, after all!' He kissed her. 'Amy, I know which door to open and I have the key. You must not oppose me. I will act for all our goods. Edith is dead to me, from this moment. Edith must go to the wall. Edith, poor soul, must accommodate herself . . . Still you say nothing?'

'What can I say? You are relieving your own feelings by talking nonsense. Why should I prevent you? I have feelings too, but silence suits them best. Don't run over that dog!'

Dand swore a little as he avoided the dog.

CHAPTER XXXVI

In the night he thought he heard her sobbing through the thin partition walls, and went to her door and knocked.

'Amy, you cannot sleep?'

'No, I cannot.'

'Come out and talk to me. In the sitting-room. On neutral ground, eh. So you need not mind.'

She came to him, presently, and started when she saw the lamp burning and a litter of papers on the table.

'You are fully dressed! Have you never been to bed?'

'Obviously not.'

He turned down and then extinguished the lamp slowly and carefully to prevent it smelling. He methodically revived the fire. The ugly, garish, commonplace room became at once a cave of mystery, a battle ground of conflicting lights. The flare of the one municipal gaslamp outside slid in through the exiguous red rep curtains, the moon was up, and shone on the landlady's wealth of plate and German nickel that covered the sideboard, till it looked like a fairy treasure in the shifting gleams. Amy sat on Dand's knee like a child and sobbed.

'Amy, isn't this absurd? Two lovers—sincere, if ever lovers were sincere—kept out of their kingdom by a course of amorous polemics that it has pleased one of the parties to put the other through! What does it all matter? Your wretched theories—they are neither here nor there. I should think you loved me enough, in all conscience, to justify your adherence to me, considering the way I have behaved to you, and you have not uttered a single reproach!'

'It is my wretched theories save you from that. Besides I cannot scold.'

'Theory or no theory, Amy, you cannot deny that I have robbed you. I am nothing but a common thief. For as the world goes, a woman's honour is a marketable commodity.'

'I was always a bad business woman,' said Amy with a curious lightness which she sometimes used when matters more serious to herself were under discussion. 'But then I have a sort of spring in me, I make the best of a bad job. I daresay after this failure, I shall go into trade again—open a small moral shop, and affront the world again with a bold face and slightly diminished capital.'

'The trade of adventuress, eh? That Johnson imputes to you.'

'Even Mr. Johnson,' said she calmly, 'cannot make me admit myself to be corrupted when I don't feel that I am.'

'No, it is like you to refuse to admit that you have crossed the line. And it is all the worse for me. I have not managed you well, Amy. I ought never to have brought you here, to this commonplace, decent, little nest, suitable only for a curate's honeymoon. A cathedral city, I see, is unsuitable for this sort of thing. We ought to have gone to Paris, of course. I should have invested you with all the usual trappings of vice, taken you to a vulgar hotel, where the waiters would have sneered and the chambermaids tittered and the gilding would have entered your soul and made you think yourself lost.'

'I don't know,' she said looking into the fire; her tears were dried. 'I am not altered, that is all I can see, and I know I am a fighting animal, and mean to go on again. I have a plan which I will tell you presently.

Give me a biscuit out of the tin. It is such hard work lying awake.'

'Amy, are you really so light, are your emotions really so superficial? You can sit here, half dressed, at three o'clock in the morning, on the knees of the man that loves you, and be—jaunty! No matter! I adore you, and I have mis-known you up to now, mentally, and physically. Idiot that I was! Your downrightness misled me, your simplicity puzzled me, and a villain did the rest. Amy, I must confess——'

'The villain is Mr. Johnson, I have no difficulty in gathering that much. But what did he do to you? Why do you feel remorse? Since you *will* tell me. I don't ask you, mind!'

Dand rose, and put her off his knee. He went across to the window, drew the curtain and contemplated the cathedral, over which the dawn was just breaking. His voice came sepulchrally to her where she sat huddled over the embers of the fire, strangely cold and spiritless before her great battle. He, the easy master of polished phrases, spoke with a difficult simplicity.

'Your fellow-secretary led me to believe—that I should not be the first. . . .'

Amy considered. Many previous conversations with him passed through her mind, for she had a good memory. She now thought she held the key to them in the suspicions of her past excited by Mr. Johnson who had, after all, betrayed her. The whole sum of bygone innuendoes and half-meanings and subtle sub-questions flared before her, it was too bad of Johnson! She had nothing but hate for him, but in accordance with her strict sense of fairness, Dand now stood exonerated. She shivered and looked at the fire. She did not like to ask him to come and make it up now and leave his post at the window. She

did not choose to do it herself. But she was very cold. She reached up to the back of the armchair and pulled down the red woollen knitted antimacassar that covered its grimness and soilure, and laid it over her shoulders. Some women would have looked handsome, gipsy-fashion, in this travesty. Amy was too pale for such an effect. She only looked wretched, and East-endish.

'Poor Sir Mervyn!' she murmured, to show Jeremy Dand she had understood him. 'He never meant or did me any harm.'

'I know that, now. But I was so upset about it once, that I went so far as to ask you about it in a letter.'

'Which I never read. Where is that letter?'

'Edith had it with her in Paris.'

'Well, I suppose I don't blame her,' said Amy gently, but after a pause. 'She's only a woman. She promised me, though! And so, you all thought me an adventuress.'

'I did. Yet I didn't care.'

'No, but you acted on it,' she replied bitterly. 'It made things easier for you. Now, you know, if I had ever read that letter of yours that started all the trouble, I should have answered it. Even, then, I suppose you would not have believed me?'

'Every woman in the presence of man, her loving enemy and friendly duellist, has the right to present the facts about herself in the most favourable light.'

'To lie in fact. But it may seem an odd thing in an adventuress—*I can't lie.*'

'No, you don't know how to fight. You will always go to the wall then—certainly in sex matters. You are not a good specimen of the class you insist on identifying yourself with. You are more like a Cassandra, wise for others, foolish for yourself. Now I will go and kill Johnson!'

He came away from the window, carefully excluding the daylight. 'I don't want to look at you—at your face. It strikes me as the face of a martyr.'

'Nonsense!' she said, violently, disturbed by this classification which did not jump with her plans. 'Don't be sentimental and conventional. I am not so much damaged as you think. I am not altered, or saddened even, only a little wiser and less cocksure. I am really just the same as when I lived with you, in your house, and looked after it, and looked after you well. You and your child. You trusted me then—why can't you now?'

'Amy, what are you driving at?'

'If I had loved you, indeed, it might have been very different. Love alters everything—prevents many plans from working. But these days with you have made no real mark on me, believe me. I am still mistress of my mind. I am not battered or corrupted, or even coarsened. And as for admitting for one moment that—what has passed between us, had lowered me in any way, I wouldn't insult you, or myself by supposing it. I did it of my own free will. It was not wrong because I did not think it wrong, at any rate, not degrading. It's thinking meanly of one's self that degrades, a deprecating attitude towards the others that you have not in any way harmed, and obscuring one's own judgment. I see quite clear now, and I see a way out. Take me, take me, Jeremy, and don't kill my pride, and abate my courage. It would be such a pity. I despaired, almost, yesterday. I don't at present, if you will only be fair to me——'

'Well?'

'Now, speaking, please, from a business point of view—nobody knows of this at Swarland?'

'No. They think there that you got badly hurt in helping the other day—your arm burned.'

'It is true, I did help,' she assured him proudly. 'My arm is all scored now.'

'I know,' he returned tenderly. 'Well, they know this, that I had to put you in a Nursing Home, and afterwards sent you away in charge of a nurse. I did not say where and they know better than to try and pump me. And, as a matter of fact, they are all too busy over Edith and her convalescence to think about you much.'

'Then it is all quite simple. I go back.'

'My dear girl, you don't mean——?' His eyebrows rose.

'I do,' said Amy coming forward, and laying her hand on his arm, 'I want to go back to your house and resume my work there as if nothing had happened. May I not, or are you going to tell me that people don't do these things?'

'They certainly don't.'

'But I am not quite the same as people—nor are you. Listen.' Her eyes sparkled. She was fighting for what she cared for most in the world. 'You admit that you are sorry for technically injuring me! That is all I will admit, and only for a purpose. I don't choose to reproach you, I never will, unless you refuse me this.'

'You want me to let you come and live in the house with me, and my wife, and her mother and mine, and be about my child?'

She looked him full in the eyes. 'Yes. Why not?'

'You can't.'

'If you say that, I shall know that you despise me—for what you, and you alone, have made me, and that you consider me dishonoured. Now, according to all my theories and your own——'

'Theories are all very well for parlour conversation,' said he slowly. 'But I suppose that when it comes to

putting them into practice, the natural man jibs a little. It's pitiful, but human. You are not human, Amy, or you couldn't propose such a thing. Such a frightfully crude arrangement could hardly have occurred to anyone but an angel, or——'

'An adventuress!' said she through her bitter tears. 'Say it. Now you have really broken my heart for the first time. Let me go. I won't threaten suicide, because I *never* mean to kill myself—only fools do. But I must tell you I don't in the least care what happens to me, and when I lose courage, it is the end of me. Good-bye, can't we part now—here?'

She turned to leave the room, and the red woollen antimacassar fell off her shoulders, and trailed after her like a splash of blood.

The man rushed forward and caught her.

'No, no, poor dear Amy, stop with me! Now, and always if you will! Of course I consent. I couldn't possibly refuse—no man could. Only—! Oh, yes, I'll hand you a blank cheque on my life—I'll give you plenary powers. What else could I do, for I love you, dearly. I know you, I have come out the other side of passion with you. I adore you *now,* when you look wretched and almost ugly, more than I ever did. Yes, come back with me, to me! You shall do whatever seems good to you. If anyone can pull it off, you can. My God, but it is a stiff job!'

'Oh, Jeremy, you Mr. Facing—both—ways! But thank you!'

She suffered him to set her in a chair, and tenderly replace the antimacassar on her shoulders. She smiled at him, she almost nestled, in her contentment, her joy in having prevailed on him.

'I suppose that you do realize a little what a penance you

are imposing on me,' he grumbled. 'I am to live constantly in the house with the woman I love—whose love I know, and what she can be—and I must be a stranger to her. I am to give her her daily orders and pay her her weekly wages and grumble at her when she does not give satisfaction, put her through all the ugly round of service——'

'You'll try and not scold me, much, for the sake of old times, won't you?'

'At any rate I shall have to look on and see my family order you about, insult you, perhaps, and my tongue will be tied. No, I could not let you be bullied. I'll bully them, and bow to you. You will be queen of the house, and yet not my wife or my mistress. Amy! . . .'

'You will deserve—any awkwardness there may be, Jeremy.'

'I know. There is a certain grim justice in it. I shall of course suffer damnably, but then, as you courteously hint, I shall deserve to suffer.'

She laid her arms round his neck.

He turned his face this way and that and kissed them, as they lay against either cheek. 'Amy, how, if I am not able to stand this sort of rational home coming? If I get ill?'

'You won't get ill—physically, Jeremy. Your housekeeper will see to that. And morally, I can assure you, you will not suffer. You will suffer no more over this disappointment than you did over the last one—you remember—the Hypnerotomachia that you couldn't acquire in Mr. Gleeson's sale. I believe all disappointments are alike, it is only a question of degree.'

'A beloved woman and a thousand pound book! Absurd you are! And the book I never had, so I can bear to lose it.'

'But I shall be so different to myself. You will be able to forget that we have ever been here. It won't be the same woman you kissed and caressed here, that you scold and pay and give orders to at Swarland, I promise you.'

'What, are you going to wear a mask?'

'I don't know, I'll manage. It will come easier than you think, Jeremy, especially, now that we have both agreed to put a nice white tombstone over the affair and buried it deep down, with no idea of ever getting an order from the Home Secretary to open the coffin——'

'You mean that I must not even nourish hopes?'

'No,' she said gravely, 'you must not even nourish hopes. Even the soul of the adventuress revolts at that. And would you care to be less strong than me? Oh, yes, you'll manage. I assure you, the woman who was here with you will be dead, she will have died to-night! Kiss me now, once—in kindness—in honour—for the very last time.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

The pleasure of the two old ladies, wandering with their knitting unravelled, their corns uncut, their knees unmassaged, about a desolate house that recked not of them, but whose whole ardour and interest was concentrated on the bed where the mistress of it lay, slowly recovering from concussion, was Amy's best welcome home.

'Oh, my dear child, now we shall know some peace and comfort again!' said Mrs. Bowman, 'I for one am not afraid of admitting that I am not so young as I was. And my joints literally crack for you. I am much, much stiffer than I was before you went way. I hope you have not forgot how to massage?'

'I have forgotten nothing, and learnt everything,' said Amy gravely.

'Got any new stitches, or Patiences?' enquired Lady Meadrow.

'No, but I believe I can invent some.'

'And, Amy, the new cook has got quite out of hand since you were away. She won't take orders from me or Phœbe Bowman, from nobody in fact but poor dear Edith's nurses, who quite rule the house. Nobody attends to us. Oh, it has been so miserable! And now you have just come back in time for Christmas. That's something to be thankful for.'

'A nurse-ridden house is awful, I know,' said Amy, 'but isn't one of them going? I heard——'

'Oh, yes, you hear everything, dear, we hear dear Edie's bell going for you every minute. But we are not jealous, we realize that you have the art of soothing the

invalid like no one else. One wouldn't wish to deny her any comfort after what she has gone through. And now, Amy dear, I do wish you would tell *us* something about it. You had the luck to see it all from the very beginning and we have been told nothing. We don't even know what hospital Jeremy put you in that next day? He had been so unaccountably close about it all. Was it——'

Lady Meadrow stopped. Amy's face had darkened ominously.

'Dear ladies, if you value my services, indeed, if you have any regard for my sanity, so to speak, never try to pump me about that. Surely you got all the facts about the accident out of the papers. I understood they were full of horrid details for weeks?'

'Yes, dear, but it isn't the same thing. Still I quite, quite understand how painful it is for you to recall it. Only one can't help wondering—and of course you had it all first hand, so to speak——'

'Hold your tongue, Isabella Meadrow!' cried Mrs. Bowman loudly. 'Hasn't Amy expressly desired you not to question her about it! She naturally wants to forget the thing as soon as possible. All the horrid past should be as dead, of course. Come, dearest Amy, let us two go and see what Erinna is doing.'

It was not worth while to make Amy nervous, considering how much depended on her, and the wiser, staider old lady had divined that the child was the best lever to raise the level of Amy's altruism and her spirits both. Amy was the mainspring of the domestic watch that had lately been allowed to run down. And she looked paler than ever, wasn't brusque any more, or ran upstairs two steps at a time as she used to do, but sighed when she had accomplished the steep turret-like stair which led to the nursery. She must on no account be overdriven.

The nursery was the likeliest place to find her. She spent all her spare time up there, with the child for whose sake she had committed a social indecency, almost a crime.

She knew that Jeremy Dand thought so. She knew that, although she had crudely forced him to see her carry out this misdemeanour, he could not forgive her for its perpetration. He sought her no more in the nursery; to Edith belonged now the odd half hour before dinner. It was seldom half an hour, he stayed much later at the office in these days. Sometimes he did not return to sleep. There were good clubs in Oldfort, of course, and the society of Mr. Johnson, who had not for some reason or other, set foot in the domain of Swarland since Amy's home coming. There was nothing in that. His visits had been less frequent, for some time before the accident.

The tragic hero of this drama, to put his behaviour into terms of everyday life, made himself disagreeable. His demeanour was 'small.' He was less brutal than tiresome. Amy sometimes thought of him as a cruel West Indian planter, who has had an intrigue with one of his female slaves and wishes to forget it. Amy both forgot, and forgave him. She was even grateful to him for not being too charming, and thus giving her an excuse to go back on her decision. His evenings at home he spent in the library, which Amy never entered. She was cut off from the informing literature of Case G, if indeed she had wanted to batten thereon, but the curiosity of morbid literature which was her only excuse for glancing at the volumes, had left her for always. As for ordinary light reading, she found books and a change of them, deposited on a little table just within the door of her room by some Brownie with a long arm. She knew who it was, and saw a tiny opening in the wall of his dislike. She never mentioned

his graceful act, or thanked him, though it touched her. He would not have liked her to speak of it. She knew him so well now, his fads and his foibles.

They conversed only at meals. Backed by an appreciative audience of two old women, they were not afraid to interpolate each other, and hold long discussions on art, and ethics, and literature. Lady Meadrow and Mrs. Bowman beamed on their dear Amy, arguing so cleverly with their dear Jeremy. They had both agreed to forget the strange communication Edith had made to them on that summer's day before the railway accident. It was probably an invention. Edith was likely to be hysterical after her confinement. The very discreet behaviour of Mr. Dand and Amy before and after lent no colour to Edith's absurd theory of their flirtation, so the two wise old women argued.

Why, Jeremy was quite nasty to Amy sometimes, and gave her his orders with a sharpness that was almost rude. He thought nothing of contradicting her flatly, and never so much as condescended to look at her when she was speaking. He seemed to resent alike her dominion over the little girl, and her influence over Edith. He permitted himself an impatient gesture at times when in his hearing imperious and frequent messages came from Mrs. Dand to the effect that she was awake and demanded Amy's immediate company.

A lover is not apt to be jealous of a woman and a child, they reflected, so that was not it. Perhaps he was getting tired of Amy's masterfulness and thought she took too much on herself? They did their very best for Amy when, as sometimes happened, he was down on her, they defended her, when some domestic act of hers had seemed a little too sweeping, some speech too arrogant, even to their indulgent selves. They excused her occasional bursts

of temper on the score of ill health. Amy, they assured Mr. Dand, had never been really well since she came out of that mysterious hospital! She must be let alone and not interfered with, when she was moody—did not dear Jeremy think so? They knew well that he, their son, was, at bottom, very fond of Amy, although he took her up so short every now and then. Jeremy must be patient and realize that Amy, in spite of the severe shock she seemed to have had, was working round and doing very well. When she was cross, it was best to let her alone. And did not Jeremy think that he ought to increase her salary?

He listened to them civilly, heavily, sulkily, with that curious air of bored simplicity that distinguished him. He did not look very well either. Perhaps the accident had shaken him a little? But no one ever dared to mention that to either Mr. Dand or Amy. It was the one subject they could not stand. Lady Meadrow felt it hard enough to live in the very house with two actual participants in the greatest railway mystery that had baffled expert curiosity for years, and glean no information, but so it was, Phœbe Bowman jumped on her whenever she even distantly alluded to it.

'What has become of old Johnson?' Dulce Dyconson enquired, when she came to Swarland with her husband for Christmas. 'Dad looks awfully seedy, but none of you seem to see it. I wonder if it is Mr. Johnson he is wearying for? The situation seems strained somehow? I don't feel comfortable here. Spookish! Amy's eyes agitate me!'

'Oh, nonsense,' said her grandmother pettishly, 'don't go putting it into Amy's head that she is ill, or she will be no good. She always was anæmic. And as for Mr. Johnson, Rémy never mentions him. I suppose he sees

enough of him at Oldfort. Rémy seems as if he didn't care to try to get back here now, except Sundays. And Mr. Johnson doesn't come over even then. I declare he hasn't been in the house at all since—the accident!'

She dropped her voice. Amy and Mr. Dand came in!

They all lunched. An argument arose in which Amy and he took part with vigour, and a slight degree of acerbity. Dulce noticed it, and yet the subject was by no means a personal one—the merits of the great system of miracle working at Lourdes. 'Why on earth is Dad so bitter?' thought the daughter. 'He looked just now as if he could have killed Amy when she disagreed with him, and said she didn't believe it worked for good in the main?' Amy had seemed to feel his unkindness. When they all rose from the table she had tears in her eyes.

There was a passage enclosed by two swing-doors, that led to Mrs. Dand's room. Half an hour after lunch the two casuists met in this narrow arena, and dropped their arms, the first time since Blois.

They were man and woman again for one brief moment. He took her sharp little chin in his hand and looked at her tenderly, simply, sadly. The air between them was weighted with a wealth of imagery and loving detail, intolerable to those who are not themselves in ecstasy, or who, having been so once, have come forth of that beatitude. She realized it. Her lips quivered.

'Well, does it work?' he asked.

'I will tell you later,' she replied with an attempt at jauntiness.

'You don't look very well? I am sorry I was so cross at lunch.'

'I can't think why you were?'

'Can't you? Well, it isn't Lourdes—I don't care a pin about Lourdes—Lourdes can't cure me! Good-bye,

go in there, I hear my wife calling you, as usual. Damn it all! Amy, how can you——?'

She was gone into his wife's room. Her long white arm and hand hanging down at her side, seemed to trail after her, and offer him the handshake of adieu. But he did not take it. He was disgusted with one of the many instances of her bad taste. She ought to have kept away from his wife. . . .

Mrs. Dand had been gossipping with her nurse. 'So common of her!' thought Amy, condemnatory in her turn. She was pacified, by seeing how wonderfully well Edith looked, and after all, if the conversation of Nurse Butcher amused her——!

'Amy,' exclaimed Edith, joyously, raising herself in bed, 'I have made nurse put me on my new pink peignoir to show you. Doesn't it look nice and naughty?'

'Oh, I don't know, I am not one of those people who insist on associating pink with impropriety,' replied Amy good humouredly. 'I should say it was very becoming, don't you think so, nurse?'

'Quite Mrs. Dand's colour!' replied the nurse, perfunctorily.

'I always think that invalids, like new-born babies, should be simply smothered in frills,' continued Amy. 'And there is nothing prettier in the world than a child's cot, all pink and transparent, like puffy clouds in summer.'

'You ought to have a nice little baby of your own, miss, you do seem so fond of children,' remarked the nurse. 'I have seen you myself, hugging of that dear little eldest girl, miss, as if you would like to eat it up.'

'Oh, yes, Miss Stephens is perfectly mad about my Erinna, nurse. I shall get jealous one of these days and insist on her marrying and starting an infant of her

own. And, oh, Amy, do you remember how I used to want you to marry Mr. Johnson?'

'Why do you remember it now? Has Mr. Johnson gone and got himself married to some one else?'

'Yes, how quick you are!'

'It was pretty obvious.'

'Well, yes, perhaps it was. I thought I should enjoy breaking the news to you. Jeremy has just been in to tell me about it. He says he has known about it some little time.'

'Well, I think I can bear it,' said the girl laughing. 'And that accounts for his never coming over all this long while.'

'I suppose so. Jeremy owns that he has missed him. I certainly have thought my dear moping dreadfully. He sees Mr. Johnson at Oldfort every day, but that isn't the same thing. What they like is pottering over books together. It is a very old tie. I have told you about it, nurse, haven't I? But of course this business of getting married and engaged first, would have accounted for any amount of neglect of old friends. Men are all alike. When dear Jeremy was courting me he didn't go to see Dulce at her school or take her out for months! She told me so herself. But to do her justice, when we met formally—her new mamma, you know—she admitted that I justified his neglect. Pretty of Dulce, wasn't it? She always did admire me even when she defied me most.'

'Yes. Whom has Mr. Johnson married?'

'A Miss Millicent Georgett.'

'Is there money? I should prefer him to marry money somehow. Poetic justice.'

'How do you mean? No, Jeremy didn't say anything about money. I expect we shall have to give him a big wedding present. Poor Jeremy! he hates giving presents,

but Mr. Johnson is such an old chum! They are living at Blois now with her mother——'

'A Blois girl, was she?'

'Yes, such a quaint old place, Blois. I love it. Very old-fashioned though. The grass grows between the paving stones of the close. We must really make a party to go over there one day—when I get well, nurse and all! To think all these years you have been here with us, Amy, you have never been shown it and it's our show place! It's a perfectly charming cathedral——'

'Delightful, I imagine,' said Amy, 'I shall expect to see it done up with cosy corners by Liberty. And about the new Mrs. Johnson? Did she live in the close among the Canons?'

'I expect so. She's one of the best people there, he says. And in a cathedral city nobody's anything who isn't clerical.'

'I suppose they'll be coming here to stay?'

'I suggested asking them to Jeremy, but he threw cold water on it. He says he hates new women. But, as a matter of fact, he's simply dying to see Johnson again and he can't have him without his wife, can he, at any rate, not at first. Jeremy is quite lost in the library without him. You know Johnson is clever—about books anyhow!'

'Yes, he is.'

'And *"The Image of that Horror"* had quite a success. They say the dear Queen has read it? You knew it was his, didn't you? But, Amy, what I can't get over is Mr. Johnson caring to marry at all! If he was really capable of such an ordinary thing as falling in love I can't think why he didn't fall in love with you? Seeing each other here, day in, day out—propinquity—they say——'

'Are you faint, miss?' Nurse Butcher asked quietly.

'Rather. But it's nothing. The shock of Mr. Johnson's marriage——'

'You used to want to marry *me* to Mr. Johnson, Edith,' remarked Dulce Dyconson, who had come in, and had taken up a position on the other side of the bed. 'Go and lie down, Amy, dear. Yes, I once thought him handsome. But I have come to hate people who even look unhealthy or morbid. It's living with a sportsman and hearing his ideals all day long. Do you know William made me cut Milliset when I was in town last, when we met over our Christmas shopping. Milliset was buying bangles in Bond Street. I must confess it looked ridiculous. William also advised me to sell my collection of books. That was good "biz," I cleared eighty pounds odd on them.'

'I saw a battered paper copy of "Bel Ami" on William's chest of drawers yesterday, when I was putting fresh covers on!' said Amy slily. She had recovered.

'Oh, yes, it is part of a sporting man's paraphernalia, that sort of book, and as he can't read more than a word of French, it won't hurt him. Don't poke fun at William, Amy, he likes you, and he is much concerned about your health. He says we all work you too hard here.'

'Nonsense!' said Amy, sharply, 'I like it. I'm all right. The winter always tries me and the cold makes me feel faint. Bad circulation, that's all!'

Nurse Butcher was looking at her curiously as she left the room.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

She did not take Mrs. Dyconson's advice and lie down, but sought Mr. Dand in the library for the first time since she had returned to live under his roof. He was sitting, his bulk which had lately grown more considerable, swallowed up in a low chair, reading. He had taken to spectacles. The matronly look imparted by this adjunct was rather pleasing than otherwise. He raised his head as she approached and took the glasses off. There was a sense of slight expectation in his eyes:

'Why have you broken through your icy resolve?' he asked. 'Have you something to tell me?'

'No, but I want to ask you to ask Mr. Johnson here for Christmas with his new wife. You quite safely can, I think.'

'But why should I ask them here?'

'You want them, or rather you want him.'

'Well, if I want to have him, why don't I?'

'I think you have refrained from asking him because you think it would be disloyal to me, that the sight of him would be painful to me?'

'I haven't considered you at all.'

'What have I done?' she asked pathetically. 'You were so cross with me in the ante-room to-day.'

'Nothing but your duty, and more than your duty. Only—I can't bring myself to imagine that your feelings are in any way acute or require consideration. You have successfully blunted them, or so it seems to me.'

'How do you mean?'

'To take one instance of your strange obtuseness, you

are constantly in my wife's room. I met you on your way there to-day. Delicacy—decency would suggest——? But people are so different. You know best how you can stand it.'

'Oh, rather cruel!' came her wounded cry. 'I will tell you how I can stand it. Because I don't consider my own feelings any more than you consider them. I override them, of course. Feelings indeed! I don't dare or deserve to have any feelings. A woman like me has no business with any, and generally hasn't. If she had, they would soon get knocked out of her. Jeremy——'

He raised his forefinger. 'Be prudent. No names!'

'Oh, I am tired of being prudent. When were you prudent—for me? . . . Thank you. Yes, I know, I must not talk so loud. . . . Jeremy, when I insisted on coming back here, in defiance of all laws of decency and propriety—I am quoting you—it was because I was so sure I was still able to be of use, and could pay my way back, so to speak. Of course it was an extraordinary thing to do, and the only way to work it was for me to get rid all my fine feelings——'

He interrupted her again. 'I don't believe you ever had any.'

'Oh, no, a daughter of the people! Dulwich can't pretend to delicacy. But you know what I do mean. I have done this, exterminated all the woman in me! And as for your objecting to my being about Edith so much, why, she calls for me continually! I suppose I could hardly refuse to go to her, just because you and I, once—oh, dear, I don't know what I am saying! The nurse tells me I am soothing to Edith, so why must not I do her all the good I can? It isn't as if now I were betraying her in any way.'

'No, you are not.'

'Very well then! I ask you, why should I import a

whole set of conventional prejudices into the affair that would only hamper me and are not even natural to me, and obscure the very plain point—that I am here only on condition I am useful to you and yours.'

'But what do you do it for? What repays you?'

'You know what is my reward. Silly of me—but I see your child now and then.'

'You love my child better than me.'

'Certainly. I don't love you at all.'

'You need not be brutal, Amy.'

'I love you, Jeremy, as the angels love,' said she gently. 'Be content.'

'And that means not at all.'

'It means that I would help you, nurse you, pick you out of a ditch—oh, do keep to the point! Won't you really ask the Johnsons here for Christmas? You want the little man—you like his company.'

'I wanted to kill him badly, once, you remember?'

Well, but that's all over now, isn't it? He isn't a bad sort really, and his wife, brought up under the shadow of the cathedral—I carefully ascertained that she had lived in the close on the opposite side to us—*may* be a lady.' She sneered. 'I understand that the neighbourhood of a great religious building is supposed to have an ennobling effect.'

'It was the influence of the cathedral that tore you from me. I shall always maintain that it was those two services you attended in my absence which turned your heart from me. You "got religion!"'

'Will you tell me why, when a man is disappointed in love, does a man always turn nasty?' asked the girl. 'It's infallible. The more he cares about you, the more he hates you when things go wrong?'

'I'm not in love with you now, am I? You assume I am not. Yes, I sometimes do hate you, Amy, as much as I

loved you. Sometimes the crudity, the brutality of the situation we have got into, maddens me. It's ridiculous, it's grotesque, it's gross, it's hopelessly false. To see you going about my house jangling my keys, the Lady, or Breadgiver, with your prim housekeeping lips conning the items of the store cupboard, adding up my servant's wages, husbanding my money——'

'Prim lips! I daresay,' said Amy with, sad jocosity. 'Don't you realize that I am trying to forget nothing? It is no joke carrying all that in one's mind, all that's needed for a big unwieldy household like this, and such a long way from provisions, too! I have to think and contrive——'

'That's the way you have spoilt your mouth. It is pinched—nearly straight now! In a year or two, I shall be able to look at it without wanting to kiss it.'

'And isn't that an eminently desirable state for you to get into?' said the girl, with tears springing into her eyes. 'Jeremy, you are being quite unnecessarily unkind!'

'Oh, yes, I am. It is my privilege. You see, I suffer, and so I try my best to make you suffer, too. I succeed, don't I? It isn't often you cry, Amy. I see a great drop waiting to fall on the edge of the eylid! Most enjoyable! And yet I long to wipe it away for you—kiss it away, perhaps? Catch you letting me! You are a virtuous virago, now. . . . We were happier in Blois in that little poky lodging house, all to ourselves, or even in that confounded dull Nursing Home at Oldfort. Nothing had happened, then. It was there you put the idea of villainy into my head. You would have it that Edith was dead. A sick fancy of yours. Nothing could have got it out, though. I can't say that I tried. Amy, why did you encourage me to come to Blois? I swear you did encourage me. You made it easy for me with your damned

indifference. You were most sweet, and faintly, anæmically, complaisant, I remember. . . .'

His book was flung to the ground. He kicked it.

'Amy, I am a vile cad for going on like this. I could curse myself. You have ruined me, as I have ruined you. Yes, I, too, owe you a grudge. You have made life absolutely worthless to me with your wretched experiment. Killed all my pleasure in it, driven me to spectacles and armchairs and the rest of senility, and now you try to palaver me and get me to accept cheap palliatives. You deny me yourself, and offer me—Johnson!' He sat heavily down again.

'Yes, do ask the Johnsons. Oh, and let me go!'

The bow of suffering was taut. She could bear no more grotesque evidence of the deterioration of the subject of her so-called experiment. His unpardonable and ungallant bitterness stung her sorely. It was the unfairness of it all that hurt her, as much if she had been a boy with schoolboy traditions. The implied compliment to her as a woman was more or less lost on her. She had honestly tried and had as nearly as possible succeeded, in abolishing her own feminine personality, while he on his side had undertaken to make no effort towards disposing of his redundant egotism in the same heroic way. He gloried in remaining the same creature, the clever male creature she had not fallen in love with, but had only been fascinated by, as women will be. He was still eager, self-assertive, and cruel. Amy, clear-eyed, and loveless, saw him quite well as he was, a charming, petulant, domineering, grown-up child, deprived of a favourite plaything by that very plaything's decree. There was the rub. He was unable to forgive the act of insubordination.

He would not let her be his friend, and yet she had made up her mind to be the best friend to him man ever

had. It was, of course, barely three months since she had been the other thing, but if the woman could forget and put it all behind her, why not the man? Indeed she had planned, some time after Christmas, to relax the rule she had made of never being alone with him. His present behaviour, alas, was in no way propitious to the pleasant readjustment she contemplated. Why could he not surrender himself cheerfully to her well thought out scheme of existence? What was this evil must of sourness that rose from the vintage of their experience together? Whatever it was, whether expressed from the situation or proceeding from the inherent character of the man who stood side by side with her in the dock of entrapping, entwining, circumstance, the woman recognized it as her punishment, if she deserved punishment? She had come to admit of that possibility. Her liberal spirit was failing. There were some subtle moral obligations whose precise degree of validity she had hardly fathomed, but she no longer doubted they were there.

She crept away, like a cowed and bullied mate of some score of years standing. She noticed—she noticed everything—that with her, the mistress, he condescended to no concealments, or modifications of mood. The wife, upstairs, saw him twice a day enter her boudoir, spruce, deferential, on his very good behaviour, his hands full of polite propitiatory offerings of flowers, and tokens of undiminished admiration and regard, and his mouth of pretty speeches. She knew this, for Edith used to tell her exultingly that Jeremy had never in all their married life been so charming a husband-lover. But with Amy, he did not pick his words, he reduplicated his gruff orders, he spoke to her often without looking at her. He did not scruple to let her see him as now, sitting, hideously caved-in, in his armchair, his legs stretched out one on

another, like an old man. Once, even, he had permitted Amy to see him asleep actually in the daytime, wearied out with squalid money getting. He was becoming addicted to the wearing of indecorous soft slippers. The hereditary enemy of old families had not spared to attack Jeremy Dand of Swarland, in due course, and to aid and abet the insidious malady, the spirit-case stood all too near the lazy hand that was stretched out for it often enough.

True, he was not well, he was getting older, he was overworked. That at least was not Amy's fault. But the fact that he was bored could be laid at her door. He *was* bored, to weariness, to extinction. To-day, his heavy eyes, with the broad reflective lids, dropped down over his book before Amy had quite left the room.

'One thing I'll do, if it destroys me! I will see that he gets his Mr. Johnson back,' she thought. 'I don't suppose there is any danger, and if there is, it can't be helped. I prefer to see him happy!'

CHAPTER XXXIX

'I PITY those two poor Johnsons, driving over the moors to-day,' said Amy, two days before Christmas. 'The wind is killing. I must see that they put in loads of wraps. She's sure to have nothing but some little trousseau elegance or other, the smart useless thing she went away in, I expect. It's only when you have been married a year or so that you condescend to be warm and ugly in a sensible old wrap like yours, Dulce.'

'Oh, I would put a woollen muffatee over my nose if it would stay on,' remarked Mrs. Dyconson, 'and that is only because my nose gets cold. I don't care in the least if it is red or not.'

'It is a good thing you are safely married,' said her father. 'Depreciation of stock is William's affair, not mine.'

'William is quite equal to the responsibility,' replied Dulce pertly. 'And you have got to speak so horridly of women lately, father! You are vexed with Mr. Johnson for having gone and got married; he won't be nearly so useful to you. Melisande will monopolize him. He calls her Melisande, I hear. Do you know it is William's one grievance against me that I am christened Dulce?'

'It's what you call a horse. I re-named her plain Jane,' said Mr. Dyconson.

'I like the name of Esmé,' remarked Amy, suddenly. 'It is my favourite.'

'Well, marry,' said Dulce, 'give the name to your first baby. It will do for either a girl or a boy. Poor old Amy! She's got the maternal instinct if ever any woman

had, and she's due to waste it all on other people's children!'

When the bleared, frozen, starveling couple arrived, it was of course Amy's business to conduct the bride to her room and introduce her to the comforts of it. She did not take to Melisande at first sight, but she did the honours as nicely as she could.

'You see, Mrs. Johnson, here'—opening cupboard doors—'plenty of room for your clothes. Here is the bathroom adjoining'—she indicated an opening masked by a handsome embroidered portière, her own handiwork—'let me see, is there anything else I ought to tell you? I think you have got everything. It wants an hour to dinner and that's at seven-thirty. Mr. Dand likes it early, so as to give him a long evening.'

'I am quite used to dining early. We dine at seven at Blois, my mother and I. Do you know Blois?'

'Yes.'

'I have lived there always.'

'In the close, wasn't it?'

'No, in North Street.'

'Oh, did you?'

'North Street is such a dear quaint old place. It used to be quite our best residential street; but a good many vulgar lodging houses have crept in lately, and let it down.'

'Ah, indeed.'

'Alec has so often spoken to me of you, Miss Stephens—isn't it? He has described you fully. But I have a sort of feeling that I have seen you before, now that my eyes have left off watering——'

'More's the pity!' thought Amy.

'—Your face is perfectly familiar to me.'

Amy braced herself. 'Really?' she drawled, 'probably

in the cathedral one day when I came over to church. I love the cathedral service.'

'Was that lately?'

'Not very lately.'

'Oh, I can remember it all now,' said the bride, jubilantly. 'It was one day early in September, just after the Blois railway accident, that I saw you. The Blois railway accident fixes it. You were looking out of the window of a house in North Street—the one with a bow window.'

'Having tea there, I expect. They give tea, don't they call it thick tea?—in nearly all the houses in that row, as I expect you know. There goes the dressing gong. I must fly. I have to hear Miss Dand say her prayers before I dress. You will ring for anything you require? One of the maids will come and fasten you.'

'Thank you, but I fasten in front,' said the bride coldly. It was a declaration of war or so at least Amy understood it.

She walked slowly along to the nursery. She really was going as she said to hear Erinna say her prayers, she did it every night, only she thought that on this occasion she might be forgiven if she did not listen very attentively. A terrible thing had happened. All through '*Gentle Jesus meek and mild*' Amy was feeling anything but Christian. Though her own hands held the two smaller ones together in the recognized attitude of prayer, firmly fixed on her knee, she was thinking of the tall weedy marplot that she herself had been mainly instrumental in bringing hither.

And in a sense she had been rewarded. She had actually caught the sullen gleam of unadmitted pleasure in Jeremy Dand's eyes while the little yellow hectic man, peeled from his rugs and looking like a thread and paper manikin sent as a Christmas present, stood in the middle of the hall by the side of his big rather overpoweringly fine

wife, and presented her to his friend. Coupled with Amy's pleasure in her master's pleasure, there had been a certain amount of feminine vexation on realizing the lightness and instability of Jeremy's emotions. Once he had talked bravely of killing Mr. Johnson on her account. She had at all events assumed that she was the cause of his lack of enthusiasm for Mr. Johnson's company. It was more as an experiment than anything else that she had persuaded Jeremy to invite him to Swarland. Well, it was a successful one, as far as Dand's comfort was concerned, but how about herself?

'Bless dear mamma, dear papa, dear sister and little brother, dear Amy, and two grandmammas——' the little urgent voice pattered on.

'All right. Now—*Lighten our darkness.*'

Amy would probably have to leave Swarland as a result of the bride's mischief. Would Jeremy care so very much? She was no comfort, no company to him now. She dared not be. He was likely enough to prefer Mr. Johnson to her in her new carefully thought-out attitude of aloofness. The man was worth more to him than the woman since her value, by her own act, was depressed. She sometimes caught herself forgetting that Jeremy had ever been anything to her but an employer of labour.

At dinner Mrs. Johnson was too much occupied in staring at Amy and then back to Mr. Dand to be able to respond properly to the pumped up civilities which as the wife of his old friend, the master of the house thought it his duty to offer her. In her excessively and possibly accidentally, decolletée evening bodice, Mr. Johnson's chosen proved a handsome sulky-looking young woman, with a strong colour, a parrot mouth and nose and aggressively crimped red hair. Her attire was what used to be called æsthetic—the reflex action of Preraphaelite maxims

exhibited on the provincial mind. That was what had first attracted Mr. Johnson, and the adroit adoption of the mediæval name had finished him. She had large swimming eyes, which she played unintelligently, indiscriminately, on everyone.

In speech she was once positively rude to Amy, at least Amy thought so, the others perhaps set it down to provincial gaucherie, of which they accounted her full. Lady Meadrow never spoke to her.

'I bet anything,' thought Amy, 'that she and her mother are one of the "disappointments of Blois," and let lodgings themselves! That is just the way they would talk if they did. Abusing their own class, a very usual trick! I don't believe she is a lady. Far too careful to speak good grammar and crooks her little finger over her cup just as the girls at the Home used to do! Her eyes are not bad. I expect Mr. Johnson caught her hanging over the water-butt in the back yard *à la* Melisande and that's how she made up to him! And he has talked to her about me—men never will see that they mustn't do that—and so now she has got her knife into me! I expect I shall have to go, and it's a bad day's work she'll have done for this house. I wonder if she'll think of that?'

The bride could not but be sensible of the immense difference that Amy's dismissal would make to the comfort of nearly all the people in the house. She was disgusted by the excessive signs of regard and affection shown by the ladies of the household for the Companion, or Lady Help, or Housekeeper, or whatever she chose to call herself. The poor old grandmothers could not possibly have any inkling of the horrible things Melisande knew about Miss Stephens or they would not kiss her so urbanely.

It *was* Mr. Dand she had seen bending over Amy in the bow window of No. 20, where, as her mother's cook

had reported, a newly married couple called Wilson were staying. It all hung together, once she was able to connect these Wilsons and Amy and Mr. Dand. She had not had an opportunity of telling Alec yet, but in the voluptuous double-bedded room and cabinet-de-toilette upstairs where poor Amy had thought the guests would be so comfortable, she meant to give him at some length her opinion of the very odd household he had brought her to. A circle in which 'all sorts of things' were alluded to in the drawing-room, and in which the host thought it good to take his wife's companion away for week-ends! What a boor Mr. Dand was, too! What the woman could see in him! What he could see in Miss Stephens! What Alec could see in Miss S.! Yet she seemed to rule them all? But wait a bit! . . .

Mr. Dyconson came in from the study alone. He appeared aggrieved.

'Those two fellows,' he said, 'started jawing about all sorts of stuff I did not understand—magic, I believe, or some such morbid rot, so I just came away from where I wasn't wanted.'

'You're wanted here, dear,' said his wife tenderly, making a place for him between her and Amy on the sofa. She was certainly very fond of him, and he was kind to her.

'And I, whom they all persecute so, made that marriage!' thought poor Amy, accepting the kind hand-squeeze which the young fellow, whom she had once thought so odious, gave her openly, to his wife's intense satisfaction. All the Dands were nice to her. She felt ill and wretched. It was the terror of the disruption that Johnson and his wife might bring about, which was working in her.

She was heartily glad when the long dull evening, faint

with the promise of Christmas, and heavy with the languors of pre-ordained universal idleness, wore away. She gave Mrs. Johnson her candle, at the same time informing her that there was an electric light over the bed in her room to read by.

'Thank you, I never do anything so unhealthy,' the bride replied with an exaggerated toss of the head. 'I just turn in, and fall fast asleep as soon as my head touches the pillow. Though to-night I have things to say to Alec. Mr. Dyconson, would you be good enough to go and dig him out for me and tell him Melisande wants him. Then the rest of you naughty men can sit up just as long as it suits you.'

CHAPTER XL

Amy next day contrived to shut herself off from every form of disagreeable communication by fainting directly after breakfast. She was in the library, where she had gone to ask Mr. Dand for a book. He had however already started for church, but his secretary was there, and it was Mr. Johnson who caught the tottering woman and carried her to the sofa, and fetched Mrs. Dand's nurse.

The nurse brought Amy round, drew a rug over her, and recommended her to lie still till lunch time. Amy was not unwilling, she was extraordinarily, unaccountably, tired, and was glad enough to lie there alone in a dream of peace.

Mr. Johnson had departed, full of kind solicitude and left her free of the room. She felt reassured. The bride, if she had attempted to make mischief, had possibly not succeeded in impressing her husband with the truth of her story. Mr. Johnson was her friend. He had not tried so far to unseat her at Swarland, he probably would go on letting her alone. She must be civil to Melisande for his sake.

She forgot that as a matter of fact, she had given the secretary no opportunity of speaking to her. She had fainted the minute she got into the room.

She slept for a couple of hours and was awakened by the grind of the motor on the gravel outside and the entrance of the church party into the room—the two old ladies and Dulce followed by Mr. Dand, and Mrs. Johnson.

The three women uttered the usual exclamations, even Mrs. Johnson made some conventional expression of sym-

pathy. Mr. Dand having condoled, left the room after one intent glance at the recumbent figure of Amy, who made a sign to Dulce. Dulce bent down, and listened. She had seen Mrs. Johnson's ugly glare of dislike, and was not surprised at the nature of the request that Amy whispered to her.

'Get that woman out of the room, can't you?'

'Now, we'll leave her,' said Mrs. Dyconson aloud, waving her arms with the air of a housewife scattering a pecking brood of chickens. 'The nurse said Miss Stephens was to be left alone, so hadn't we all better go and get our outdoor things off. I'll come back to you, dear, as soon as I have chivied them off to their rooms,' she whispered.

'Thank you,' Amy said in a low voice.

'I'm going,' said old Mrs. Bowman. 'After I have kissed dear Amy!"

The old woman stooped and performed the loving act, and then Lady Meadrow, not to be outdone, swooped gracefully and followed her example.

'Ta-ta!' said Dulce, the last of the file. 'I say, Amy, I wish you had seen the bride's face when all the mothers cuddled you! It expressed envy, hatred and malice and all the bad passions she has only just got back from praying against. Well, I'll go and get my hat off and come back and sit with you.'

She reached the door, and met her father just returning. He had heard her last words and framed his rejoinder on them:

'No, Dulce, don't come back just yet. I want to speak to Amy.'

He closed the door. Amy was looking at him.

'You are perfectly happy, now,' she remarked. 'Now that you have got your dear Johnson back again.'

'Don't be spiteful, my dear. It isn't like you to wish to deny me any *innocent* pleasure, at least. Besides, you yourself begged me to send for him and his wife, whom, by the way, I could do very well without.'

'Husband and wife are one flesh,' said Amy. 'But I do hope they are not too united a couple.'

'Why do you hope so?' He seemed preoccupied.

'Because she hates me, and she may be able to persuade him to do me an injury.'

'Poor child, you are very vulnerable. But never mind the Johnsons. They're only malice in a small way. It is Fate that's against you.'

'Jeremy, that woman saw me at Blois.'

'Well, you must bluff her.'

'I did.'

'Bluff again.'

'And if that fails?'

'I suppose you will have to go,' he said with strange calmness.

'Of course! It would be impossible for me to stay, then. If I must, I must, but I am not intending to let things go so easily, I assure you. I am more than ever determined to stay now that I have made good my footing here once more. I am getting to be happy again.'

'You are "fey," my dear. Haven't you felt misfortune coming nearer?'

'No, for it isn't. Misfortune isn't coming,' she cried urgently. 'Oh, Jeremy, why do you try to frighten me? They never all loved me more. I am like a sister to Edith and a daughter to your mother. Is it wrong? Love can never be wrong. It is an end in itself. Sit down. You look so uncomfortable standing over me. Did you see the old ladies kiss me?'

'They wouldn't if they knew.'

'No, but surely it isn't my business to tell them. Need they know that I once made an awful mistake, that I have wiped out by sheer hard work in their service. Haven't I? Do you really think it mean of me to let them kiss me? I won't, if you had rather not. It is no particular pleasure to me, except for what it symbolizes. Jeremy, your looks are dreadful to me. Perhaps in your heart of hearts, you think I ought to go?'

'I always did think so—dear.'

'When you say, dear, I know there is something that disturbs you, at the very least. You never show me any signs of affection when things are going right. Jeremy, don't you want me to show fight to that mediæval miss, or is it that you have got your dear Johnson back and don't care for me to stay any more? If you don't, say so, and I'll not bother to fight him.'

'The Johnson part of it has not the slightest importance.'

'But this time, there is a woman in it, and if he splits it will be to them all. The first time didn't matter so much, it was only to you.'

'Didn't matter! It set the whole hideous ball a-rolling. It has rolled up now to such a pitch of misery and horror. . . . On my soul, I don't know what to do? . . .' He walked across to the other side of the room and poured himself out a tumbler full of brandy.

'What are you doing that for?' she exclaimed, raising herself.

'Lie still, Love! . . . Have you ever seen me drunk?'

He returned the bottle to its place, and coming back to Amy, sat down and took her hand.

'Who knows, dearest? It may not be so bad as I think. Taking your very peculiar character into consideration, it

may be the means of regeneration for us. All's well that ends well. Perhaps you will be flung back to me, willy-nilly, for you will certainly have to leave this and I shall go with you.'

She sat bolt upright.

'Not at all! Don't flatter yourself. If I am to go, I shall go quietly, you may be sure of that, but no recommendations to mercy! I am old enough to know what I am doing. Neither you, nor anyone else will know where to find me. I promised Edith. We once had it all out together. Your happy home shall not be broken up for me. I shall take care to destroy all the clues, or no, I shall throw myself on your honour and you will not persist in seeking me. You are a gentleman, after all, and I once thought I loved you. I even told you that I did, like a fool, and I ran away with you. It was a false move and I came back. And you were quite good then, you realized that I should never be anything to you any more, never, never! You kissed me for the last time that night in the parlour at Blois, do you remember?'

'Yes, I remember. What a kiss it was!'

'Yes, because it had finality in it. The last kiss, the end paper, Finis, like in Durer's picture, with all the sand run out of the hour glass and the clock stopped and, the broken stones lying about. But I am not Melancholia. I am Courage.'

'Yes, you are. Lie down.' He bent her body down arbitrarily on the couch. 'Rest. But talk. I want to hear you. You will never speak like this again. Explain yourself and the workings of your poor little mind to me, who love you, once for all.'

'Oh, don't laugh at me. Understand me. Jeremy, you know me—no, you don't. Listen! I am not vile. You could not have loved me if I had been any other sort of

woman. I suppose I have sinned against light, but then I never saw the light. I was always utterly uninspired, I read a lot of poetry now, to show me things I never dreamed of, and poetry tells me I am not vile. . . . Yes, and you have reproached me and looked grim at me, for the callousness, and coarseness of my attitude in this house, but don't you see, it was the only way? I could not stay in it unless I firmly refused to be anything more to you than your housekeeper. I have not dared, as yet, to be your friend. It has been, so far, very sad and lonely for me. This is the first time I have been in this dear room since I came back from Blois. I had to keep myself well in hand and restrain your kindness——'

'I was brutal to you!'

'I had to offend you and huff you, and make you disagreeable to me, because I knew so well that to talk and laugh with you would lead to—other things and rouse your man's irritability and imperiousness. You men must always have things the way you want them. Well, you couldn't, quite—this time—it wouldn't have been decent. So I had to be a hard, matter-of-fact, slangy sort of person, don't you know—not let myself be in the least attractive to you as a woman. It is difficult, for it is fighting against one's instinct. I had to show you that I was sensible, not hysterical, and that I had managed to come out of that particular experience clear, scot-free, practically unchanged! I can't think why I am such a poor thing now, though. I suppose the effort of repressing one's individuality for so long is exhausting, rather——'

She lay back, and smiled at him. He turned his face away.

'I am not so sure of that,' he said doggedly.

'Sure of what? You sound disagreeable.'

'That you have got out of it so altogether scot-free—

that's what I was coming to tell you. Don't look at me like that, Amy! Yes, I do mean to explain. Strange, though, that it should be left to me. I should have thought you—— Dear Amy, you are *not* clear——'

'Oh, please don't be mysterious. I can bear anything you choose to tell me. What can you know about me that I don't know myself?'

'A little medical fact, apparently. I may be mistaken, but I think you are going to have a child.'

'Nonsense!' She flung her legs to the floor and stood up; her brows met, her face grew red with anger. . . .

He turned away. 'Well, you know best.'

'Of course I do. It is impossible, what you say. How can you be so dreadfully crude?' There was a sharp note in her voice.

'It's a crude thing to happen,' he returned gently. 'Don't you see, though, that if I am right, that you cannot possibly leave me now?'

'Can't I, just?'

She turned on him with sudden fury, she called him brute and cruel, as a tiger woman in the East End might do, then tottered and fell forward on his breast.

Dand stroked her dull hair, and held her. She murmured presently, the force of her grim passion spent——

'Ah, couldn't I die—before——'

'Don't be a coward, dear. Be yourself. Yet who am I to talk, I who have been dosing myself with brandy for the last half hour before I could get up courage for this!'

'I don't wonder. . . . Jeremy, you have murdered me!'

'No, I am not a murderer, I am a man, that is to say, an ordinary, selfish beast. . . . Here, hadn't you better lie down again?'

'No, no, keep on holding me. I can't move. . . . I should see your face.'

'Why not?' His tone was an endearment.

'Shy. . . .' she muttered, her mouth was buried in the lapel of his coat. Never before had she seemed so lovable. He said so, he vowed she should never go from him. She *must* love him now. This that all women suffer she must suffer for him who passionately loved, cherished, adored her. Her child should be, as it were, his only child. He had never said so much to any woman before. He felt her tears on his hand that her faint cheek rested upon. . . .

Poor Amy, she had been so cross on hearing his revelation. But not half so sulky, at any rate, as Edith had been when threatened with the like inconvenience. . . .

The door opened slowly, and Mr. Johnson came in. Jeremy Dand saw him well enough, but either from pride or stupefaction, did not alter his position. He merely moved his head a little, it may have been deprecatingly, and so Mr. Johnson understood it. Casting a glance of sympathy and adherence in his friend's direction, the secretary left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XLI

Amy stumbled along the passages, whose very walls seemed to her to reel as she passed, and mounted the great staircase, while each grade of the short flight she had to go down again to attain her own room in the older part of the house rose and slapped the soles of her feet. Her nostrils were assailed by the smell of the Sunday roast. 'They will not keep that door shut!' she thought angrily, domestically efficient even in her anguish.

She had met various cheerful people on their way to partake of it on her way up the staircase. Mrs. Bowman trundled along, buttoning the last button of her cuff. Amy stopped, and offered to do it up for her. As the girl was so occupied, Lady Meadrow pottered past, stealing a glance at a side mirror. They both tenderly kissed her again. Their twin kisses burned on her cheek.

She heard Erinna's happy prattle on the landing above her. She did not turn.

'Oh, Amy, wait for me!' the little spoilt child wailed. 'You *are* unkind!' She had little blue bows looping up the shoulders of her Sunday pinafore, an old-fashioned mode that Amy affected for her. The ends of her yellow hair curled round Amy's finger. Amy knew that; she had taught them. She would have had to stop and kiss her if she stayed. And all that was over.

She knew that she was not reasonable, that her feelings were running counter to all her theories. She had not dreamed that an old-fashioned traditional sentiment could so sway her. She knew she was as fit as anyone else to kiss

Erinna, and yet she could not bring herself to do it. She knew the old ladies loved her for services rendered; their affection irked her, as much as if she had been into their rooms and stolen their jewels.

About three o'clock there came a knock at her door, and in response to her tart question, Mr. Johnson declared himself, and requested an interview with her. She had not seen the sympathy and compassion on his face an hour ago, when he had looked into the study and surprised her in the arms of Jeremy Dand. She confounded him with his wife, her enemy, and replied to him rudely and curtly. She, however, knew she had better see him, and tell him of her resolve.

'Come in! Come in, and shut the door.'

'I have had some difficulty in giving my lady-wife the slip,' he said hurriedly, 'but I felt I must see you. I have a communication to make to you—apropos of a conversation Melisande and I have been having. But first of all, how are you? Better, I hope?'

She stole a quick glance at him. Was his diagnosis of her faint the same as Mr. Dand's? She would not be in a hurry to lay down her arms, to give up her cause all along the line. There would be some desultory shooting yet at certain points. She replied gravely:

'I am all right now, thank you, Mr. Johnson.'

'That was a nasty faint of yours. Quite sudden, wasn't it? I was just going to speak to you in the library when you seemed to fall and crumble away at my feet.'

'And took the wind out of your sails, eh?' she replied. 'So that was why you refrained.'

'Refrained from what?'

'From threatening me—from denouncing me in your usual charming fashion. Oh, I assure you since I have lived here I have got quite used to living in the crater. I

had even built a garden in it. But so many times the pitcher goes to the well——'

'You think I am going to denounce you?'

'Well, are you not? I tell you, you have hardened me to it.'

'Miss Stephens, you are not yourself. I think when you have heard what I have to say, that you will be sorry for having taken this tone with me.'

'I am sorry now,' she said wearily. 'I beg your pardon. I am, as you say, a poor cornered rat. I naturally assumed that your wife had stirred you up to make fresh trouble for me.'

'Ah, my wife. . . . Well, you see, Miss Stephens, women *will* take their own line in these matters, one can't prevent them. Melisande and I have come to an arrangement of sorts. But we won't speak of her just now. You and I, Miss Stephens, have agreed to bury the hatchet: We are friends, fast friends. I am very sorry for you. Much as I disapprove of certain details of your conduct, I hope that I have sufficient imagination to see that there may be—there are—excuses for you. The whole situation is abnormal, morbid, as Melisande says, to a degree.'

'You have talked me over, you two?'

'I am afraid we have. She insisted. Of course, as she says, I ought to be ashamed of even so slightly, conniving at—— I did not even dare to tell her what I saw just now?'

'Don't for goodness sake, connive, then. Expose me. What was it you saw just now?'

'You in his arms.'

'Ah, just after he had told me—— Well, it was excusable, under the circumstances.'

'I am not criticizing either of you, Miss Stephens. I may say I am too loyal for that.' His expression changed to

the hungry, puzzled look of a digger for literary treasure. 'But one thing I could not, I confess, fit in with my knowledge of the general drift of our friend's character. I really could not bring the expression into line at all. He was soothing you, caressing your hair——'

'Don't!'

'And his words to you were or seemed to be—"Stick it out, old girl!" or some such phrase. Now, as an author, one is distinctly interested in this drop into slangy phraseology under the influence of strong emotion——'

'I refuse to explain it,' said Amy, smiling.

'No matter. The artist must be content as usual to construct from the merest shreds of testimony. But to business—your business. Remember this, Miss Stephens, I shall never expose you, even if I don't understand, and that's a rather impossible contingency. Rightly or, as I fear, wrongly, your cause and Jeremy's is my cause. When I think that in some sort I am responsible for it all——'

She stared. 'You?'

'I mean my non-fulfilment of the wish expressed in Sir Mervyn Dymond's will.'

'Good Lord!' said Amy, and that was all she said.

'And moreover!' continued the author, with touching reference to a brother artist. 'There may be—there is—a morality above that which ordinary persons are called upon to practice. Maeterlinck says so. And a man of Jeremy's commanding intellect is above law, so I always thought. Excuse me if I am vague, but I have a headache. I have had a little scene with my wife. Miss Stephens, just take it that I, personally, am your friend——'

'And how about your wife?'

'Ah, there's the rub. It was my wife saw you at Blois.'

'And since when may a woman not go to Blois?'

'Ah, but I am afraid there is no getting out of it that

way. My wife says under highly questionable circumstances.'

'What else does your wife expect when I am concerned?'

'You are bitter, dear Miss Stephens. But bluff as you like, there is evidence to prove that you were not alone.'

'I seldom am.'

'Mr. Dand took you to Blois in the motor from Oldfort —one Saturday. He domiciled you at Mrs. Gray's at No. 20 North Street, where you stayed three weeks, and where Jeremy joined you on Saturdays, to Mondays.'

'How does Mrs. Johnson know that?'

'Am I to tell you all the unfortunate series of coincidences which led to your identification as Mr. Dand's companion? Well, here you are! My wife's mother's servant happens to be the intimate friend—crony, gossip if you like, of Mrs. Gray, and was in her house all the afternoon of Sunday, the 29th of September.'

'She is caught out there, for I was alone, as it happens. And if you make enquiries, you will find that Mr. Dand was here, safe in the bosom of his family.'

'Yes, that is so. For some reason best known to yourselves he left you that Saturday night. But he came back again at twelve o'clock on Monday morning and you left together on Tuesday.'

'I see that the reputation of Blois for gossip and old cats is deserved.'

'You are wasting time in fencing with me, you really are, Miss Stephens. Can't you honestly look on me as your friend? I mean to be. I have worked for you in defiance of conventions. I have stopped my wife's mouth——'

'Clever man!'

'But only on one condition. She bore it very well—it was you confess rather an eye-opener for a bride in her first month, to be told that such terrible things exist, and

I maintain that she has shown a very enlightened spirit about it. Of course, I mould her. Well, the condition is a very obvious one. She has promised to hold her tongue if —she has not talked in Blois, in was only on seeing you that she connected you and our host and no one thinks anything of what he does in Blois, he is privileged to be queer. She won't say anything about what she has noticed, if you, on the other hand, will engage to go quietly away from this house and put an end to a—extricate yourself from an untenable position. It is a horrible, unjustifiable state of things! That scene to-day. . . . I am not a narrow-minded man, but even I——'

'I may as well tell you that yesterday was the first time I have been alone with Mr. Dand since my return from Blois.'

'I am glad you have told me that, and of course I believe you,' said Johnson earnestly. 'You are a very strange —a most remarkable woman, and Jeremy is a very remarkable man. I can imagine that if Fate had thought fit to give you two to each other in the first instance, you would have proved a very well assorted couple.'

'You are wrong,' said Amy. 'We are by no means made for each other.'

'Then what an extraordinary——'

'But though we jar,' she continued, 'we sympathize in one thing. Neither of us is ordinary. Unlike flew to unlike—what you will! It is no use trying to explain things!'

'It would interest me psychologically.'

'Ah, but I am not going to offer myself up to you for mental vivisection. What I have done I have done, and the God that perhaps made me, knows. I know I have fought like the devil and I have been conquered. I should say that I had been unfairly treated among you all, if I

didn't call myself a philosopher. The world has been unsatisfactory enough to me. No one has ever been really kind except to be cruel, after. No one has ever really loved me.'

'Perhaps you on your side, have never let yourself love anyone. You are an Amazon, and ought to have been christened Hippolyta.'

'Clever of you, Mr. Johnson! And I have no doubt you are right in a way. I believed I once loved a boy of sixteen best of all because he never gave me any unhappiness, but, as you would say, love without bitterness isn't love. "*Sweet love, that art so bitter.*" I wish I *had* loved Jeremy, then I should at all events, have had a good time and been hanged, when it came to an end, as all things do, for a sheep instead of a lamb. And he does not love me, don't you believe it—he never did. Don't I know? And so do you. For you know a thing or two, Mr. Johnson, for all you are so determined to stick it down in print. . . . And you have been kind to me—you mean to be kind, anyway, and I ought to be more grateful. But I can't help it, I am not, and I seem to hate you all.'

'Never mind,' said the little man gently. 'It is natural in your position. Everyone seems against you. They have to be. And it is hard that it should fall on me, who am quite strangely fond of you——'

Amy had the weary smile of Monna Lisa, in listening to this admission on the part of the husband of Melisande.

'—To bully you and constrain you. For go you must.'

'Oh, yes, I'll go. I was going anyhow. You sneer. You don't believe me?'

'It is difficult to believe such an announcement, coming hard on my threat.'

'It is so, nevertheless! I took my resolution to leave Swarland at precisely one o'clock this day. Believe me or not as you like. As a matter of fact my health has quite

broken down: I cannot stand the work of this house. Everything is put on my shoulders and as you observe, they are not quite broad enough. I am driven to feminine protests—fainting about the house and so on. Now, will you go, dear Mr. Johnson, and thank you. You see I am quite amenable—delighted to oblige you by going. Personally, I shall be glad to get out of this and into healthy town life again. I expect I shall be able to leave in a few days! You don't want me to go at once, do you, because, if I do so, people might talk and think I had been sent away. We must avoid that.'

'Quite so. Will you—if you will give me the address of the place in London that you go to—after—I will try—I might be able—I have a literary connection—to find you something to do?'

'A secretaryship—sleep-out kind of thing, do you mean? Oh yes! It would never do to introduce me into a private house as one of the family again! I can never get back to that, can I, do you think? But if I keep myself quite—*quite* respectable perhaps my dear Erinna will be allowed to come and see me when she is married, say? Not that it's much use counting on children remembering one, they are so proverbially ungrateful. I am afraid I had better make up my mind to forget her——'

There was a pause, in which Amy was obviously conning over to herself the charms of Jeremy Dand's daughter and mentally lavishing expressions of endearment on her. Then she sat up with a jerk and addressed a remark—to herself. Afterwards, Mr. Johnson affirmed that all through this interview Amy had 'not been quite normal.' She had scolded herself aloud—'Shut up, Amy! You little fool!'

Very gravely she turned to the author. 'Do you know, Mr. Johnson, you were quite wrong that first time you accused me. I was straight enough till I came here, and

went to Blois in Mr. Dand's motor, six weeks after the accident. That did it all. To think that an accident, a few people killed, such a little thing,—just A Foot, put down hard on a few wretched ants crawling about their business—and yet, how it dwarfs everything that comes after! Yes, it was that night, and nothing else, that did for me. Have you ever seen the scene after a railway accident, Mr. Johnson? No? Good for you! I don't believe you would even keep true to Melisande after living through an experience like mine. They've never done it on any stage, or in any novel, either. Hell for four hours or so! I have never told a single soul about it, or the effect it had on me! A moral effect, of course. It made me stark staring wicked, if you like, or at any rate careless. I ask you, what did it matter what Jeremy and I did, when Nature went and did *that!* Blind and stupid, and cruel, like a schoolboy pulling the legs off flies. Why should we flies try to be good and clever? We didn't try—at least, I didn't. I just let myself go—and Jeremy took me! . . . I am neglecting to thank you, Mr. Johnson, for your kind offer of help. I think, however, I would rather start afresh, that is, if I survive—the wrench.' She added hastily, 'It will be a wrench, you know, to leave this, and the child.'

'Miss Stephens, you are extremely plucky, but I still think you should in the last resort have someone to refer to—some strong man. You must give me some clue to your future.'

'No. I shall prefer to strike out some new line for myself, after—— And you see, it would hamper me considerably if you, dear Mr. Johnson—and Mrs. Johnson, we must not forget her!—had the power of heading me off again. So, thank you all the same, I'll see myself through this time. Stop, don't rush off like that. Indeed, I am

grateful to you. This has been a most interesting and useful conversation that we have had. I prefer to deal with men always. Women are so apt to be cats. I never do really get on with them.'

'You are surely not thinking of Melisande?' enquired Mr. Johnson anxiously.

'No, not particularly. She's done me no good. But no harm either. It's like this. The Fates have refused to work with Melisande. They have done without her co-operation. You won't understand that, and I don't mean you to. You are not in my counsels. No one is, not a soul.'

'Not even Jeremy?' insinuated Johnson deprecatingly.

'No, not even he. I mean he won't know where I am going. You look surprised?'

'I should have thought—the relations between you—justified a certain amount of intimacy. To have taken a step of that kind together, people usually——'

'You are so conventional, dear Mr. Johnson. I should not have expected it of you! I suppose, in your idea, nothing less than a wild excess of passion would justify my conduct, eh? Doesn't it occur to you that a lack of—the emotion you allude to would be a very good reason for my breaking off—here? Surely things have gone quite far enough without the redeeming excuse? I could tell you. . . . But you wouldn't see it! . . . You see everything, just now, in terms of Melisande.'

'I love Melisande, my wife, and I am very fond of you.' The secretary looked worried.

'There you go!' she exclaimed pitilessly. 'Nice distinctions. How do you know it isn't the other way? You think me indecent to say a thing like that? But I say none of us here know anything about it. It isn't an exact science, or a revelation you get at the City Temple. Love is a many-headed sort of god, and some of the kinds you

swear by, are not it at all. I'll say, if you like, that it is like the gospel of Scripture, denied to thousands of those who went before, and to most of those that come after, like me. I suppose if anybody ever wanted a missionary, it was I. Jeremy took no trouble with me, just went his way, assumed that every woman was like another. . . . And so she is, in one way, at least. One part of it's sure—my part. . . . You are getting bored, aren't you, with the queer last swan song of Amy Stephens, Mr. Johnson? . . . No matter, you are a kind man, and I have no quarrel with you. I go, and I bear you no malice. You didn't give me away, did you, except to Jeremy, and that was to save him. Funny, and it was you I was afraid of for years like a loathsome threatened disease, and then I die of something else. Give me your hand, Alec Johnson. You haven't harmed me. Good-bye!'

His weak grey eyes swam full of devotion as he grasped her hand, and stooping, kissed it.

Amy looked gravely down at the place where his lips had been pressed. He could not see the little flash of triumph in her sad eyes.

'Yes, good-bye! Don't go straight back to Melisande from me. Walk about the garden a little, won't you?'

'Why?'

Her pretty, consciously feminine laugh stirred him. It was the first time he had heard it so. He understood Jeremy's craze, now. To hear her laugh—in love!

'Why not?' he repeated, flattered. Oh, if he had taken this beautiful woman and her dower years ago!

'She might object to you—fresh from me!'

With one touch of her hand, and a thin lance of sweet spite, Amy unhorsed the other woman, as it were, from her seat in the husband's heart for ever, and justified her own lover in the eyes of his friend.

CHAPTER XLII

THE scene was set for Christmas, and well set too. The proper frosty light blinked in at the small leaded panes of Swarland Hall, casting a weird glare, as of a world hung with white sheets for a magic lantern, on low walls and ceilings. The reflection of the snow on the ground outside made even pale faces to glow with the colours of health.

'The white rose is red for the time!' Dand said to Amy, meeting her on the stairs, bearing an armful of decorative trifles destined for the Christmas tree.

She did not answer; she was too busy. She merely transferred a portion of her burden from her arms to his. They went downstairs together in silence. She had not held any conversation with him since that Sunday morning in the library. Certain things troubled her in their order, but she was too proud to consult him about them. They were just matters of business, how in the future she was to live, and so on. In the watches of the night she thought these problems out; in the daytime she gave her whole mind and energy to the service of the family she was about to leave.

The spruce fir tree stood in the middle of the hall. Amy spent the whole of the morning decking it with little useless gew-gaws she had had sent down from London, wreathing it with trailing threads of tinsel, planting toy candles on the tips of the boughs, arranging them with carefully calculated minimum of risk to the inflated skirts of the dozen or so of little children for whom the nursery kingdom of Heaven was that day to be opened at four o'clock precisely.

Mr. and Mrs. Judd were coming over from the Vicarage, escorting their huge and complete family of seven. There was a young Greatorex staying in the house with his mamma, a cousin of Jeremy Dand's. Mr. Dyconson's débutante sister was here. Some Meadrow grandnephews of varying ages brought up the juvenile count to over a dozen. There would be plenty of cheerful, noisy boys and girls to stuff their pudgy hands into the ghostly horrors of the dish of snap-dragon and to join in 'Hide and Seek' and 'I Spy' afterwards all over the house. To this agreeable and romantic end Amy had had fires lit in every room in the house, and had seen that the hearths were effectually guarded, too. No tragedies, except her own!

She had arranged it all, presents, visitors, revels, and in a few days more she would cleverly organize her own departure. Her flight was to be as neat and efficient a piece of engineering as her wit could devise. No loop-hole was to be left whereby Jeremy Dand would be able to recover his housekeeper. A perfectly clean sweep was to be made of that functionary by that functionary herself. Edith Dand, who was coming down to-day for an hour or two, would soon be well enough to resume the reins; Amy had cunningly consulted the doctor in charge to gain that reassuring certainty.

But her own outlook was not promising. It bristled with money difficulties. She ought, she knew, on that head to consult the man who had led her into them, but she had set her brains to work to avoid doing so. He should have thought of it himself. Men were so thoughtless! Naked she came into the house, nearly naked she would go out of it. She had saved a year's salary. That was not an excessive sum. The miser-lover hated paying over large sums regularly, though he could be generous upon occasion, witness the valuable furs he had once given her and which

now lay at the very bottom of her trunk, for she dared not affront the eyes of Swarland in them. She fancied she could raise six hundred on them, and she was probably right, for she knew as much about furs as Dand. She judged these rightly a valuable asset, nearly as good as pearls.

She thought a little, very little, on these things as she stooped, and rose, and stooped again and tired her back with arduous celebration of Christmas rites. This was the time of her employers, she loyally adhered to it. She worked hard till four o'clock. Then the grey white waste of snow was shut out, the tree was made to blaze, and the last guests having arrived, the draught-admitting hall door was closed and sealed for a space. Amy's simple soul rejoiced with light and merriment, and the innocent gaiety of young children. But as the evening wore on, she began to feel, but not own, herself tired—worse than tired. . . .

Jeremy Dand solemnly gave away the presents and stripped the tree, while Amy, hovering near, blew out dangerous candles and steadied tottering ones.

On the topmost boughs, he had fastened his own personal gifts, and he now dispensed them, calling on each eager recipient by name.

His gifts were neat, light, pretty, and nothing wonderful. He had purchased them hastily in Oldfort the day before. It was the first time he had chosen to dispense his 'fairings' in this way from the tree. To Amy he handed down a little necklet of Roman pearls such as are worn by girls behind counters, and village belles. Amy, smiling prettily, clasped it round her neck, as children immediately don the rings and gauds out of crackers. Mrs. Johnson, who was not near enough to see him reach the little cheap necklace down, was anxious, however, it seemed, to ascertain the extent of Mr. Dand's generosity. She approached:

'What has he given *you,* Miss Stephens?' she asked in her gritty tones, into which Amy, rightly or wrongly, could not help reading intention of a spiteful sort.

To the innocent-seeming question, put by anyone else, she would have replied, or touched the necklet, significantly, but she did not choose to answer Melisande, who departed from her side, haughty and rebuffed.

Amy bitterly enjoyed the disdaining of this insolent ill-bred creature who more than suspected her, who *knew*, but was only restrained from betraying her by her husband's command and that command wrung from him by his shamefaced liking for the criminal. Amy took it that now she had no cause to exercise diplomacy of any kind, she need not stoop to propitiate, since she feared no one. Those that loved her would continue to love her for the short space that was left. The luxury of indifference was hers till the gates of Swarland Hall should close behind her for the last time.

Oh, but it was pleasure to have a secret, a cruel secret, yet one that attached her to the big world of humanity that moved, regardless, outside the ordered calm of an English country house. Praise and blame were weighed out differently there. She hugged maliciously the knowledge of something about herself, that would have driven Melisande and her like into a frenzy of short-sighted indignation, and caused her to seek to flee from Amy's contaminating neighbourhood. . . . She began to take a savage pride in her own perdition. So some victim, about to lay his head on the block for a cause, just or unjust, might exult in his post of supreme dishonour. Amy exulted, and yet—the curious under-ache born of feminine isolation and traditional fear of despisal pointed the sensation to positive pain. . . .

They were all playing games now. '*General Post*' was

suggested by Edith and inaugurated by Melisande, who seemed to have some notion of cutting Amy out in her rôle of mistress of the revels. Amy had no objection, she was getting exhausted. She chose 'London' as her place name, and Melisande, who at Edith's request, undertook to call out the names, worked her very hard. 'London to Oldfort!' 'London to Criston!' 'London to Kamschatka!' rang out continually. Mr. Dand was 'Oldfort.' As she crossed with him—'This is what I shall soon be doing,' she thought. 'From Oldfort to London, in less than fifty-six hours from now.' He looked at her commiseratingly as they ambled past each other. He was slow and heavy, too, his gout troubled him. To her it seemed bitterly comic, as she dragged herself past the watchful sentry and gained her opposite corner, panting, out of breath, exhausted.

The game was changed to *Blindman's Buff*. Amy fared no better. Melisande when she was Blindman, was always catching Amy, and once, when her victim was in her turn blindfolded, managed to trip her up. Amy fell clumsily. She pushed the bandage up from her forehead. The face of Melisande bending over, expressed distinct malice. A strange, gruesome notion came into the poor girl's head. It possibly occurred to Jeremy Dand, too, for after assisting Amy to rise, he managed to whisper into her ear:

'Go and sit down now. I insist on it. And when we play "*I spy*" hide in the library, I want to speak to you.'

Amy did as she was bid and pleading temporary disablement—Billy Greatorex's foot had caught her shin, she said, and Melisande sneered—straightway sought Mr. Johnson, regardless of his wife's evident disapprobation of the course she was steering. No matter, it happened to be Melisande's own fault that Amy had an understanding with Mr. Johnson, and trusted him now as she would an old friend. Moreover, anyone might have heard what she

said or very nearly so. She perched herself on a high window seat in his neighbourhood, and beckoned to him with a queenly air of command.

'You know, Mr. Johnson,' she said indifferently, 'that I am thinking of asking Mrs. Dand if she can spare me for a holiday?'

'I think you are very wise,' replied the author, who was not diplomatic enough to avoid looking knowing.

'I shall go and meet my brother Bert, home from the Cape. You didn't know I had got a brother Bert, did you? Quite a nice person but drops his aitches! And I think of leaving here the day after to-morrow.'

'That's the day we go.'

'Exactly. What train?'

'The twelve ten London express.'

'That's what I thought. Mr. Dand will have used the motor. The carriage will be sent round to take you and your wife to Oldfort in time to catch the express. I have thought it all out. If I go with you it saves me having to ask for a conveyance all to myself, and so I can join you at the last moment, without any talk or previous arrangement-making. See?'

'I certainly see merits in the plan. Only—I must tell you, that my wife's mother joins us at Criston.'

'Well, can't you square her? Not that I am afraid of a couple of women. The main thing is for me to get out of this without Jeremy's knowing—Mr. Dand, I forgot. He would be sure to interfere. He is not keen on my going, you know?'

'Jeremy is weak.'

'Not at all. He knows what he wants—and so do I know what I want. I shall win. I do not intend that he or anyone should know where I go when I leave this.'

'As far as Jeremy is concerned that is as it should be,

but I think that I, your friend—and more than friend, Amy—should be allowed to have a clue to your whereabouts.'

'Mr. Johnson, don't be silly! You are only just married, you happen to have got a wife with—shall we say very fixed ideas on the relations between the sexes?—why need you go and spoil your married life from the very outset, by setting her back up, and going directly counter to her notions of right and wrong. And for what? To befriend and get mixed up with a woman who doesn't want befriending or to be mixed up with you. No, if you will let me travel down to London with you, for the reasons I have stated, and if you can get your women to be fairly civil to me during the journey, it is all I require of you, and I shall be very grateful. There she is looking at us! Do you pine to go and tell her all about it?'

'Miss Stephens, do you really suppose that I cannot keep my own counsel in a case of this kind?'

'I know you will *in a case of this kind* because it is your own wish that I should leave quietly, and if you tell her, there's an end of it! But if not, husbands are bound to be sieves. Oh, they're going to have "*I spy.*" I'm on.'

She leapt clumsily off the window-sill where she was sitting, with the eye of Mrs. Johnson on her, and joined the party who were told off to hide. She obeyed Dand and made her way to the distant library. She knew now why he had opposed its use as a cache and had insisted on having the door locked, with the key left outside as a hint. She entered now and left the door open. It would not look well for her to be closeted there with Mr. Dand, and the chances were that no one would use the room as a hiding place; it was too far off. She turned off the switches so that the room was illumined only by the shifting gleams of firelight, and conformably with the rules of the childish

game they were playing, half concealed herself behind one of the wine-red curtains and waited.

Mr. Dand came in, presently, perfunctorily peering into the corners through his pince-nez. 'I spy!' he remarked, in a melancholy tone, for the benefit of possible listeners.

'All right!' said she, coming out, pale and still. 'No one is here. What did you want to say to me?'

'That I have opened an account to your credit at Barclay's Bank, London Branch, 1 Pall Mall East, and invested in your name the sum of fifteen thousand pounds odd in various safe enterprises, of which a list will be supplied to you at the Bank when you call, including mandates for you to sign, enabling them to collect your dividends for you. You had better let them.'

'What is that a year?'

'Over four hundred.'

'I won't refuse. I know that I must have money.'

'I am glad you are so sensible. Where are you going? To London, I suppose?'

'Yes, to London when I do go. More than that, I am telling no one.'

'Of course you are not putting an announcement in the society papers!' He sneered. 'But I shall expect to be kept informed of your movements. I take it you don't mean to come back here after——'

'No.'

'You are right. It would of course be out of the question. *Non bis in idem.* But you are aware that I mean to marry you.'

'Are you intending to murder your wife, then?'

'No. She shall divorce me.'

'But I don't love you, Jeremy, and she does. Is it possible you don't realize that what I can't give you, she gives you good measure and pressed down?'

'You are misinformed. She does not. Neither of you love me, but *you* happen to be blunt enough to admit it. It all comes to the same thing in the end.' His voice became pleading. 'For the sake of the child, Amy?'

'It would not do the child any good. And it is not the child you are thinking of. It is me——'

She laid her ugly little hardworked hand on his arm, and he looked down at it with tender contemplativeness, as she continued gently.

'But you are wrong about me. You don't understand me; or my case. I am not angry, not injured, not grieved even. I don't mind it at all, now. I carried on a bit when you first told me, because it was so strange and queer that it should be you to tell me a thing like that, and I was startled and a little frightened. I felt wicked, too, then, but I don't now. I feel good. Jeremy Dand, listen to me, for I won't say it all again. I am glad that I am going to have a baby. I shall think of nothing else till it is born and perhaps after too. I mean to bring it up properly, excellently, supremely well, it shall be a model baby—a State baby, don't you remember how I always believed in every woman having one State child? And that is why I am taking the money. And when I say that I feel good, don't you understand that I could not feel good if I were harming anyone but myself—if I were breaking up your home and causing you to make your wife wretched, and humiliated, and letting you disgrace your nice old name for me. Don't you see? No, you don't see, you see nothing, you are blinded by self-will. But I am not going to give in to you. I am not. I am not!'

She stamped her foot in her vehemence and then wavered. He took hold of her, and steadied her. She lunged against him, as though at last she sought protection.

'Be calm, dear, someone will come. And abuse me as

you like, you will think better of it. Perhaps you will even think of me, and the state you are consigning me to. With my character, without your exaltation which bears you up, I shall be miserable. There will be consequences of which in your self-willed Quixotism you don't dream——' His eyes grew dull and strained. 'But as to the first part of your scheme it is excellent, and I believe you are clever and sensible enough to carry it through. But it won't be the State baby, it will be Mine, and I must know where the mother of it is.' He laughed. 'Now, listen, Amy, if you choose to play me a silly trick and go off without telling me where you are going, you may be sure that I won't put detectives on to you or adopt any raw methods of that kind for finding you. I am too proud. But what I *shall* do is this: I make no bones about informing you. I shall shoot myself. Most of our people do, as I daresay you have heard. A silly trick—means nothing—but efficacious.'

'A silly trick indeed,' said Amy, taking his hand, 'and one that I have no sympathy for. I say, we must really go back to the game.'

'Wait, let me kiss that mouth.'

'Ah, don't tease me, and want me to give you tokens of affection. I've given you one sign. And demonstrations tease me now, as they always did. My mouth! You always liked my mouth and the way I wore it. My one beauty! Everybody in the house knows you admire it! But what's a mouth, or trick of gesture like that? Listen to me, that's the best compliment to my mouth! I maintain that I have only made a very small hole in your life. I have not broken it up altogether and made a complete mess of it as I might. You have plenty of other interests. You have got a son. That's enough for most people. You don't seem to appreciate that. And talking of suicide, surely if I, with the excuse I've got, haven't thought it necessary to commit

suicide, don't you think it would be rather cowardly of you, a man, to take the relief I, a woman, don't condescend to seek? Why, I am not going to raise a finger to arrest the thing that has befallen me! I don't touch the pendulum, as you used to say, and go jumping off chairs and tables like Edith used to do. Though I can't help thinking that Madam Melisande has been trying to put me through my paces to-night. She *did* work me hard. The exercise she made me take! A bride of a month, and up to all that! I pity Mr. Johnson. She is going to be a handful. Be kind to him. . . . And as for me, do let me manage my own affairs my own way, unless you think that you have gained the right to interfere by giving me money. I won't take it if you do. I can manage. But I refuse to be hampered and made to feel in the wrong. That would depress me and weaken me. I want to give all my mind and all my energies to bearing a sane and healthy child, strong enough not to be oppressed and inconvenienced by the circumstances of its birth, and if all you upset and worry and fuss me, I shan't be able to manage it. I am sorry if I seem a vixen, but it is for the sake of the child. Let me alone. I can do what I have got to do. I didn't choose it exactly; it has been thrust upon me. But so far, I am perfectly comfortable in my mind and normal in my health. Thanks to you, I shall have plenty of money to work in. I shall be able to take a nice room, or rooms, in a decent house, cheerful view, and the rest of it. I shall sleep soft—I shall eat nourishing things—I shall read—I shall at last be able to wear my beautiful furs.' She laughed. 'Do you know I have never been able even to unpack them here?'

'You are wearing the pearls I gave you.'

'These?' touching her neck. 'They are not real?'

'Quite real. It was a clever dodge of mine, wasn't it,

hanging them to the topmost bough of the tree, like any little dressmaker's hack's cheap collar. I got them in Amsterdam last week and was casting about how to give them to you. They are fairly well matched. You must be prepared to swear they're false to Edith and the rest.'

'I do believe you love me,' said she thoughtfully.

'Because I give you pearls? Oh, Amy!'

'Because I know what it—money-spending—means with you.'

He seized her shoulder, her body. She took herself away gently, as always.

'Dear, what is the good of going on like that? Hadn't you better say, "I spy!" and let me chase you back into the hall?'

Nipping him delicately by the sleeve, she pushed and led him back into the assembly as her prisoner.

CHAPTER XLIII

The rites were over. Christmas merriment had waxed thin. Christmas gifts were broken. The children had all gone home, and their elders, all except Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, who were due to leave this morning. The rime still lay on the gravel, the snow on the garden beds, grown transparent, daily decreasing, showed the brown earth through here and there. It was two days since Amy had held her conversation with her master in the library. Mr. Dand's motor, snorting and rattling, stood at the door of Swarland Hall, and Mr. Dand stood in the hall of his house, encumbered with the luggage of the Johnsons, and while he buttoned himself into his coat, bade them a lukewarm farewell. He disliked Mrs. Johnson excessively and did not mean that she should be asked to stay in his house again. Johnson, of course, was an habitué; he could not spare Johnson; Johnson must arrange it with his wife as best he could. Besides, he saw his secretary daily at his office at Oldfort, where the newly married pair were setting up house. They were going to town to-day for a week, to choose carpets and household stuffs. Melisande thought she wanted Morris furniture to go with her name.

Amy was not about, but he had seen her at breakfast, and she looked all right. She always went to the nursery with Erinna after that meal. Curiously enough, he thought, she took less interest in the child than she had done, though she was still a second mother to his little girl.

She was the angel of his house, but she would have to

be going soon. Still, for a few evenings more, he thought that it would be pleasant to come back after the day's work was over, and have the house to themselves again, free of the hateful presence of Melisande, who coarsely, persistently, had tried to annoy Amy. At breakfast that very morning she had contrived to be as offensive as she dared. Some devil possessed the woman! Amy had endured her rudeness patiently. Dand supposed that, like himself, she looked for the approaching relief of the creature's departure and bore up. Amy's manner was perfect. She was amiable without being abject. Yet it was a difficult position. Melisande knew, or thought she knew, too much.

He always drove himself into Oldfort to his work. This morning he went gently down the drive with his head full of combinations of an imperious business nature. He kept his love affairs—Amy—for the end of the day. He would talk to her quietly and make a plan. Yes, this matter would soon be settled; it was almost a good thing that Amy's misadventure had brought it to a head. They could not have gone on as they had done. It was a false position, an affair that only an omniscient, domineering woman like dear little Amy could have hoped to conduct to a safe issue. Edith would not mind, so long as settlements were good. . . . She was a handsome doll; she would, of course, marry again. . . . Strange, how divorce ran in her family! She was used to it. . . . His boy! She would have the boy. . . . Tiresome, but Amy would give him one. The other, of course, would be the heir. Why not? A nice child, the offspring of a nice mother. Edith had her points. . . .

The air was wintry, fresh, but not cold. He enjoyed it and took the pace slowly, in no hurry to gain the dull bit of road outside his demesne.

Dand of Swarland. . . . Disgraced? No, not a bit of it! A queer fish! . . . A headstrong, self-willed fellow with a way and a will of his own, that's all. . . . A scandal? It was better than a suicide, at any rate. . .

A bend of the drive now hid the house from view. He was nearing the kitchen garden, that lay close up to the pleasance, as his wife liked to call it, on that side. He saw Amy stooping over the glass frame of a bed of Christmas roses. She had no hat on, and her brown hair, grown duller lately, now gleamed golden in the strong morning light. Her features were dimmed a little by the mild glare from the glass of the frame as she rose to her full height and looked at him.

He stopped, seeing that she meant him to do so. He always took things for granted; it was one of his charms.

'I want to board the car a minute,' she remarked, advancing quietly. She mounted and stood on the step, her queer eyes gazing down on him, as if she were thinking how old and grey he had got to look. That was true. She carried that vision away with her, having apparently sucked it in carefully. He, on his side, always associated that one moment, whose significance he was naturally behindhand with her in estimating, with the restless throb of the motor, and its hidden power, billowing, bumping, simmering underneath. Amy's poise was graceful, fugitive; she held a white rose in her hand. He marvelled a little at her new amenability, her leisureliness and willingness to dally with him whom heretofore she had shunned.

'I shall be back early to-night,' said he, and then, wistfully: 'We might talk over things, if you will?'

'Back early! Shall you? What time?' she asked indifferently. 'Well, good-bye now.'

Absently she stooped and kissed him.

When she returned to the house, walking very slowly,

with her head bent down, she found Lady Meadrow, who had just descended from the upper floors, examining the initials on one of the boxes that stood in the hall and which had not been there when Jeremy had left. As a matter of fact, Amy had brought it down herself furtively, with the aid of her ally, Erinna's nurse.

'A. S. Amy's initials! Amy going away? What does it mean?'

She turned and faced the young girl.

'It means what you say, dear Poupée,' Amy answered her composedly. 'That I am going off to London to-day for a little holiday. Just a sudden thought! I seemed to need a change of some kind.'

'Have you spoken to Edith about it?' asked the old lady gravely. 'You don't want to throw her back again?'

'Yes, I have just told her. She is quite well enough to stand a little shock of that kind now. She doesn't object to my going away for a short while, and I hope you don't either?'

'One doesn't want to look selfish,' murmured the poor old lady.

'I am sure you don't,' said Amy hastily. 'And I knew you wouldn't be unkind and make a fuss and deny me a thing I had set my heart on, would you? You see, it fell out so conveniently, the Johnsons going and being willing that I should travel up to town with them to-day. It is such a long, dreary journey all alone, and I am still a little bit nervous, naturally, after—I must say I simply jumped at the opportunity.'

'But when did it first occur to you, my dear? You have never breathed a word about going.'

'You'll all think me quite mad, of course, but I must confess that up to last night I had no idea of it.'

'I don't think you mad, no; I think you quite right to

look after yourself, but it will be most awkward,' the old lady said huffily.

'For you and Mrs. Bowman? Oh, not so very. I have ordered all your dinners a week ahead. You'll hardly miss me till I am back again—God forgive me for a liar!' she added to herself, as the other old lady made her appearance, halting at the head of the staircase.

'I have been in to dear Edith, and she has just told me,' Mrs. Bowman observed gloomily, descending and leaning officiously on her stick—her only support for the coming week. 'Of course, it is most upsetting and unheard of, but I don't see what we can do, for Edith says that the idea of a change seems to have quite run away with you, Amy, and that you are absolutely determined.'

'So it has,' cried Amy, eagerly adopting their phraseology. 'I woke up with the suddenest, intensest longing for change. I suppose—you know I *have* had my hands rather full lately.'

'Oh, yes, you have certainly earned your holiday; let us be just,' said Mrs. Bowman, who was just. 'Isabella Meadrow and I should be the last people to quarrel with you for wanting a rest. My poor old joints begin to ache at the very thought of your absence, however. I must give you a few commissions for you to execute for me in town. Who are you going to stay with?'

'Some old friends of my mother's,' replied Amy in a tone of polite finality which effectually precluded further questioning from two fundamentally well-bred old ladies. Lady Meadrow contented herself with the humble petition:

'Shall you be anywhere near Woollands?'

'I can arrange to be. What do you want there?'

'You might get me some new vests. Mine have washed up so. . . I mean the sleeveless—but high-necked——'

'I won't forget. Sleeveless—high-necked—excuse me,

ladies. I haven't much time. I must go and say good-bye to Erinna.'

When she came down again she found the carriage with the tray on the top standing already at the door, and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson far too busy superintending the settlement of their luggage thereon to take any notice of her reddened eyelids. The old ladies were too short-sighted to see that Amy, when she embraced them with the modified fervour due to a short absence, had been crying bitterly because she was leaving the child merely for a week. It would have puzzled them. As it was, the child was not even down in the hall to see the last of her.

But, by request, when the brougham had moved on, a little face was pressed against the window pane of an upper story, and a little hand waved kisses to her dear, darling Amy, whom she would never see again till she was grown up. At that sight, Amy bowed herself in her corner of the brougham, and sobbed, regardless. What matter for Mrs. Johnson's frozen stare of disgust? And Mr. Johnson knew.

CHAPTER XLIV

'No, Johnson, I don't care if you *are* dirty and travel-stained and want a drink and the rest of it. You are to sit down in that chair and tell me all about this dark doing of yours before you dare to do anything else. What did you mean by spiriting my Amy away from me like that?'

Jeremy Dand spoke with an evil and bitter jauntiness. He sat in his big chair in the library at Swarland, his swollen foot bandaged and raised. He had a bad attack of gout. His features were a little coarsened; his manner alternated between surliness and brutality, with occasional flashes of envenomed wit. He did not care what he said.

Mr. Johnson's attitude was that of a nurse in charge of a boisterous, unreasonable, sick child. He dared not resent the roughness, the indelicacy of his friend's talk, and was glad enough when it so fell out that those speeches were addressed to himself alone. For Jeremy Dand spoke out loud mostly, and did not seem to care who heard him. His wife knew, the whole household knew, that he mourned Amy's absence like a lover, and that this present severe attack had been brought on by rage when the fact of her unceremonious departure had been sprung upon him on his return home from the office one evening a week ago. He had come back unusually placable and cheerful, so they all thought, but his ungovernable burst of frenzied recrimination then had been the first indication to them all that Amy's absence was to be more than temporary.

The two had had a lovers' quarrel, and the woman had

gone away in a huff. That was the accepted version at Swarland—a most humiliating one for Mrs. Dand.

She was behaving very well. She had evidently no idea of leaving her gout-stricken husband. When, a few moments ago, she had brought Mr. Johnson, just as he was, straight into the library, she had worn the puzzled look of endurance proper to the outraged wife of an invalid whose parlous state in some sort minimized the insults she received from him. Dand knew not what he did. The only possible thing for her to do was to isolate him as far as possible and give him the confidant he roared for. To that end she had herself telegraphed an urgent message to the author, who had obediently left his wife and mother behind and come hither with the dust of London still on his boots. He took a seat and prepared to be insulted. His manner was as apologetic and disarming as he could make it.

'Jeremy, you admit that she had to go. There would have been a scandal. That visit of yours to Blois! My wife would have revealed all, unless her conditions had been complied with.'

'Revealed all! Comply with her conditions! Damn your wife! Do try and talk like a man and not like a novel. What I say is, how dared you aid and abet her to steal off like that? I should have persuaded her to stay, if I had only had fair warning of her intention!'

'I don't think you *would* have persuaded her, Jeremy. If I know anything of women——'

'You don't.'

'I have lived in this house for three years with Miss Stephens and your wife, not to speak of my own, and it has been a liberal education. No, Amy Stephens would not have stayed on here. Anything so determined as that pale girl, so self-reliant, so sensible——'

'Leave off raving about my Amy, will you?'

'I can't conceal my admiration of her. I could not, so much so, that I and Melisande——'

'You split on Amy, eh?'

'Something very like it. Melisande is a trifle hard.'

'Oh, you are beginning to find that out, are you? As hard as nails, and crooked into the bargain. A foul-mouthed, brutal woman! What did you do to my Amy between you all?'

He groaned with gout and misery.

'If you will be quiet, and not talk so loud, and refrain from abuse, I'll tell you all about it from the very beginning. I want to unburden my mind to someone.'

'Very well, I'm the proper person.'

'I blame myself. That journey down—I am afraid it was a veritable Via Dolorosa for the poor girl! I was nice to her, of course, as nice as I dared, but my women—you know my wife's mother joined us at Criston?'

'Another infernal cad and devil! Did she bring her pot of brimstone and her pitchfork, too, and torture my poor girl? Do you know, Johnson, she kissed me? She said "Good-bye" that morning quite quietly, poor thing, with all the restraint in the world, lest I should suspect and take it for the last farewell that it was. A kiss from Amy of her own free will! You don't know what that means! She said—— Well, go on.'

'I suppose you have guessed why she chose to travel with us?'

'As a penance, I should think.'

'It may be. But, primarily, I think because it was the best way of keeping you out of the secret. You would have insisted on following her. She thought it all out. It was wonderful of her, most clever, and, as you suggest, a little heroic, for she was afraid of Melisande.'

'She loathed her, as we all did. So do you, Johnson, now. Yours has been a very short honeymoon.'

'Oh, it will be all right, I hope, when she comes back from London and we are able to take up home life in Oldfort. At present, I own it is just as well that we are apart, for to tell you the truth, I was much annoyed with her apropos of her behaviour to Miss Stephens, and said some excessively bitter things. But one must not be too hard on women. They have their little, silly code, and they are down, in the interests of their own sex, on any infringement of it. Conventions are made for women, after all. They are no use to us. Miss Stephens had very wide views on all these subjects, poor girl, but to her cost. *She* suffers. During that awful journey, I was entirely on her side, of course, but I considered that too obvious sympathy and partisanship would only have made matters worse. I even removed myself part of the time and went into a smoker, thinking that the three might take the opportunity to adjust their relation a little. They might have got talking of clothes, and so on. But——'

'And when you came back, I suppose you found the vulturesses had plucked the dove!'

'I was distressed, for I could see she had not been precisely enjoying herself. She looked wretched; in fact, most terribly forlorn, and I wished I had never left the carriage, from a mistaken idea of diplomacy.'

'You diplomatic, Johnson! And what do you suppose they had been doing to her?'

'She was sitting, all scrumped up, as Melisande would say, as if she dreaded their eyes. I gathered afterwards that my wife had had a stupid notion about her which she had somehow or other found means to communicate to her mother. I don't much like Melisande's mother! And then, I suppose they contrived to work it, as women

can, you know, when they have got a grudge against another woman.'

'What the hell was it?'

'I hardly like to tell you, it is so crude. Quite unfounded, of course, I am sure. It originated, it appears, in Melisande's mind, at that Christmas tree business, when we all played games—do you remember? She says she laughingly introduced Mrs. Dand into the plot, but I don't believe either of them took it seriously. Still it was very spiteful, as I told my wife, and scolded her well, I can assure you.'

'Come to the point.'

'Well, it reminded me a little of the test imposed by the ladies of the Danish court on poor Tovelille, Little Dove, the mistress of King Waldemar. They forced her to dance—at a time when she was unfit for such strenuous exercise; and they killed her, for she was a lady of great spirit and danced herself to death, to convince them that there was nothing in it.'

'That's a pretty story. How do you apply it?'

'Well, on Christmas Eve, didn't it strike you, Jeremy, that Melisande contrived never to let Amy rest for a single moment? It was Amy here and Amy there! The girl was on the go the whole evening. Melisande admits that she did it on purpose. I was awfully vexed with her when she told me, and there has been a slight coldness ever since. You can, of course, easily conceive how they contrived to let Amy know what they were thinking of her?'

'Trust them! Well, well, Johnson, take up your cross. You are married to a fiend. It's no matter. Continue. Did Amy read during the journey at all?'

'No. She had forgotten to bring a book. She looked

out of the window most of the time. It was unlike her, but I shrewdly suspect that on this particular occasion she was crying.'

'Did she eat?'

'She had prepared a magnificent luncheon basket for us, but as far as I could see, she would not eat one sandwich.'

'Who dispensed the contents of the magnificent basket?'

'Melisande, of course.'

'Then I understand. You brutes starved her; she was an hungered—was she cold?'

'I tried to make her take my rug, but she would not have it.'

'You did your best, I suppose, to persuade her? And this agony of six hours—how did it end?'

'As all journeys end. The train rolled and flapped and swung into King's Cross, passing through the tunnels like a succession of swing doors, riding on to a breathless finish. The train's alive, then, going through the valley of the Shadow, with Apollyon clashing his wings, to arrest——'

'Stop poetizing, and let us hear about Amy.'

'Melisande nobbled a porter—two porters—mountains of luggage we had! Amy had none; she had sent hers on. I saw her arranging for it at Oldfort. Of course I did not try to see the address on the labels, but I expect it was to some hotel, and then she might only be staying there one night. No clue there. I dared not ask her outright, because of Melisande. She would have thought all sorts of things.'

'Who cares what she thought? However, it's done. Go on.'

'Amy stood up and gave herself a little shake, and reached up and took her umbrella out of the rack. She looked once at Melisande and her mother, a sort of "Forgive, they know not what they do" sort of look—nodded kindly at me—and bolted! In the confusion, I just caught a glimpse of her disappearing into the black gulf at the left side, where the cabs are, don't you know? She never turned round once. And that was the last I saw of her!'

'Saw of who?' said Mrs. Dand, coming in. 'Jeremy, you must really let poor Mr. Johnson go and tidy himself up for dinner.'

Her face was soft, white, peevish in expression. She looked older since the railway accident. She was a good deal changed, but the vice of curiosity was still uppermost. She returned to the charge. 'Saw who, Jeremy?' Mr. Johnson had profited by her permission and gone upstairs.

'Amy,' said her husband briefly.

'Oh, Amy!' Her lips grew more peevish than ever. 'I suppose you want her back?'

'Do you, Edith? After what you thought of her?'

'Oh, I never thought there was any harm in her. Not half so much harm as there is in your making yourself and me ridiculous by telling everyone you can't live without her. We are disgraced. I'd rather have the woman here and pacify you. Where is she? Where does she write from? I suppose she writes to you?'

'I have no address.'

'Well, we haven't, any of us, or I would write and tell her she'd better come back at once and manage us all and make me a cipher in my own house again. But no one seems to have any idea where she is. Mamma got her vests—sleeveless, high—just what she asked Amy

to get her, but Woolland's shop label isn't much of a clue.'

'Sleeveless . . . high . . . Woolland's shop label!' repeated her husband, in an absurd manner. She looked at him sharply.

'What's the matter, Jeremy? Good heavens! I believe he's going to faint!'

She flew down the passage, shrieking for male aid.

CHAPTER XLV

Both the old ladies had been better than their word. They had stayed on at Swarland in spite of the stroke of adverse fortune that had befallen them all. They had chosen to stand by Edith, who was much changed, and who was doing her best to be a better manager than she had been in the past. Household matters had been properly organized and set on a footing for all time by Amy; it was less difficult to keep them straight.

The Swarland catastrophe was not attributable to any action of Edith's; she had not dismissed Amy, she had been as much taken by surprise as any of them. They knew that, for Mrs. Dand was incapable of guile, except in a small way, and she was, moreover, lying ill and crippled in bed at the time when Amy had chosen to execute her *coup de main.*

It was not until July, when Amy had been gone nearly seven months, that Mrs. Dand could reckon herself completely recovered and was allowed by the doctor to go about the house as before. That gentleman, indeed, thought that she had been very quick about it, considering that she had been accounted dead for nearly twenty-four hours after the accident, but, 'recovery from concussion,' Mrs. Bowman remarked uncharitably, 'depends entirely on how much brain you have got to concuss. Now, if it had been my poor son who had been injured, one could have understood his present state.'

The master of Swarland was failing. Everyone noticed it. He was not half the man he was. He was pining away because he could not live without Amy Stephens.

He grossly made no secret of it. There was no stopping his mouth. Edith talked wisely and serenely about his state, out of books. She instructed the others, so that her own philosophy of the case came back to her in their preaching. She must not mind too much or allow herself to be affronted by his crude speeches and behaviour, for a man in his physical and mental condition need hardly be held responsible for his words. She must put self aside, and cleverly wile him away from his overpowering preoccupation. She must not, of course, take an invalid's diagnosis of his own health, and must trust to time and care and change of subject. His little son was coming on, and she must hope to get the father to take more interest in the child as the days wore on. He had refused to take a holiday or they would have gone to the south of France and lived and bathed in sunlight, which would have done her good, too. But Jeremy's intense obstinacy and selfishness must always be taken into account. He still went every day into town, and very often he chose to sleep there in a room he had retained permanently at the Continental. He preferred the dinner at the Oldfort Conservative Club—an insult which she was forced to smilingly let pass—to his wife's catering. Accounts, timid, hesitating, from the office, told of a certain failure of grip and control of the many affairs under his charge. But Lord Gould, the head of the firm, was devoted to him, and would never be hard on him. Mr. Johnson was invaluable and ubiquitous. Somehow or other, they all hoped to tide over this trying time of the head man's temporary invalidation.

If it passed away? The fear of the ancestral curse of the Dands of Swarland lurking, less aloof than usual, hung over the household like a doom of ill.

Daily the three ladies discussed the awful problem of Amy and her prolonged absence. She was the pivot on

which their comfort and more than their comfort turned. The whole fabric of family life was like a machine from which an important screw has dropped out. The thoughtless girl had now been full seven months away. She had literally flitted, and no one had realized the finality of her easy good-byes. She had given no address, as it had turned out, though at the time each lady referred to the other for that useful indication. Did Mr. Dand know where she was? Did he correspond with her? He had forbidden anyone to mention her name to him. The order was scrupulously obeyed, for he was liable now to transports of ungovernable rage, which he did not try to govern. But in the drawing-room conciliabules, which were the only comfort of the three forlorn women, surmise of every kind, and sometimes of the crudest, was rife. When little Erinna and little Hugh came in, bowed and pinafored, all tongues were stopped from wagging, talk about Amy was strictly tabooed for the time, but after the children's hour was over, the inalienable subject was once more introduced.

Had Jeremy sent Amy away? Had they quarrelled? Had she gone of her own accord? Was he keeping her somewhere? Lady Meadrow called her a cockatrice. Mrs. Bowman called her a most managing woman, who ought to be head of some institution or other somewhere. Wherever she was, they all agreed, she was managing something or somebody. Mrs. Johnson during the course of a brief visit, never repeated, on her return from London, had contributed a spiteful item to the fund of surmise, which they all three refused to hear of. Edith had closed her ears out of vanity, the other two from sheer liking for Amy. They all disliked Melisande, who was never asked again. Mr. Dand had been quite consistent; he had sedulously refused to address a single word to her while she

was under his roof. The situation was most unpleasant, but the husband of Melisande, good creature, out of his love for Jeremy, accepted it, and meekly agreed to his wife's paying a prolonged and indefinite visit to her mother at Blois, while he himself consented practically to live at Swarland, so as to be a help to Jeremy and an escort to him on his daily journeys to Oldfort. Mrs. Dand had come to lean on the author as the brother she had never had. He constituted the only intermediary between herself and her alienated husband.

Mrs. Dand, present at these conclaves, with her strip of needlework, or embroidered frock for Erinna, spoke very little. From a talkative, discursive, loosely speaking woman, she had grown curiously self-contained. It was her mother's reproach that 'Edith brooded and was a regular curmudgeon about gossip.' She listened to cogitations, reminiscences about Amy; she did not contribute. It was her idea of decency, so Mrs. Bowman thought, and commended her daughter-in-law. She was sure, however, at the same time, that dear Edith liked to hear about Amy, and took it all in, though she was so quiet. She looked older physically. Some grey streaks showed in her ebony hair. She was a little agitated about this sign of age, but not much. She allowed lotions to be recommended to her, but was casual about their use. As usual, she bought many clothes, and hardly looked at them. Her whole personality was 'settling.' She had the soul of a schoolgirl; she was only now growing up, too late to be a successful woman. In her sad, stupid, beautiful eyes was the slow maturing of a futile, an imperfect scheme and theory of life. Her mental apparatus moved slowly, but oiled by misfortune, it worked.

One very hot day in mid-July she sent her little girl with a solemn message to Mr. Johnson in the study, left

vacant to-day by Jeremy Dand's absence in Oldfort. Would Mr. Johnson kindly give her five minutes' conversation in her boudoir?

Mr. Johnson put away his papers—he was writing another novel, alone, this time—and obeyed. As an author, this panorama of typical women interested him deeply. Amy—and then Edith! Each so absolutely different. And he the confidant of them both. Jeremy, his friend, between them! Of the two lovers he was passionately fond. Edith he did not care for; she was too raw, too conventional, too simple for the lover of complexity. He was sorry for her, her trivial personality ground between the two stronger, more overbearing ones of Jeremy and Amy.

It was five o'clock. There were no flowers on Mrs. Dand's balcony; the gardener had forgotten, another lapse occasioned by Amy's absence. The effect of the whole apartment was less consciously meretricious than it had been in Amy's time. There were fewer scent bottles, and photographs, and flowers; but Edith still adhered to her voluptuous tea gowns, and rose to meet him in a cloud of vaporous chiffon as heretofore.

She spoke quickly, inartistically, with the ugly slurring modulation that meant with her a certain degree of emotion.

'Mr. Johnson, I sent for you, because I suddenly felt that I must speak to a man. The old ladies are all very well, but one gets no further with them. And I have come to see how serious it all is. I must have something settled about Amy!'

She stopped. There was a tear on her eyelid; she was one of those women who cannot discuss their own affairs without shedding tears of self-pity. Mr. Johnson waited patiently, till she had rapidly passed her lace hand-

kerchief over her eyes, and had rushed into garrulous speech:

'It is a case of possession—demoniacal possession!' she exclaimed. 'She has bewitched my husband. There is no doubt of it. You know about those sort of things. If people were burned for witchcraft nowadays, I would have Amy burned.'

'I believe you would,' he replied, fascinated by her murderous stolidity. She had more character than he supposed.

'I would stand up and accuse her of coming here into his house and mine and setting herself to steal away his health and his peace of mind. He didn't love her, or she him; but all the same she had the power of sending him wild by removing herself and keeping away from him when he most wanted her. She makes him want her from a distance, she has driven him mad, and if that isn't being a witch, I don't know what is.'

'Dear lady, Jeremy isn't mad.'

'No. I tell you he is possessed. He eats, but his food does not nourish him; he lies down, but he cannot sleep. He is always quite kind and courteous to me, but he looks at me—like a man that is bound—somehow? I am very unhappy about it, Mr. Johnson.'

'So am I.' He pulled himself up with a jerk. 'But, look here; you must not get the thing on your nerves like this. You must not let it worry you.'

'Not worry! Am I to look on quietly and see my husband simply perishing before my eyes? I know Jeremy. He has a very peculiar constitution, and I tell you he hasn't a year's life in him if this goes on. I must worry; I know too much not to. Mr. Johnson, I am not a fool. I know it is the fashion in this house, and especially since Amy came, to say that I am only a pretty doll and care

for nothing but clothes, but it isn't true. I am really a very serious sort of woman, and what is more, I have a heart. Jeremy, whom I am breaking my own about, quietly, has none. No! Have none of you found that out, ever? He doesn't know what love is.'

Mr. Johnson looked an interrogation.

'Pardon me, I never said that he loved Amy. I did not admit such a disgraceful thing. I deny it. I do not for a single moment believe that there is anything wrong between them or ever has been—only the absurd fact remains he can't live without her, or thinks he can't. He's a hysterical man—there *are* hysterical men as well as women. Whether he cares for her in that improper way or not, and you look as if you thought him an unfaithful husband—yes, you do!—I admit that he doesn't seem able to bear her not being about as usual. His business suffers, and you know how interested he always was and is in the office work, and of course annoyance there reacts on his nerves and makes him worse. He can't do without praise from Lord Gould, and that Gresham-Green deal not coming off, and their assuming it was his fault, touched him deeply. Amy—oh, I daresay, he admires her, in a way, more than me, obviously—I quite recognize that——'

She was wandering slightly in thought, as usual. To give herself a countenance, she looked furtively in a little mirror that stood on the small table at her elbow. Johnson appreciated the pathos of the unconscious gesture. She continued:

'If you asked him now he would say that he loved her. He does say so, of course. I have heard him shouting it out through the closed door when you have been with him. And you hushing him. Nice position for me! All the servants could hear it, too; for, of course, I wasn't at the keyhole. Do you know, Mr. Johnson,' she continued,

with a bitter smile, 'I used to laugh and say that Amy was the mistress of his house, but that I was the mistress of his heart, and that I preferred it so. I used to say it to her. But now it is the other way, I think. I rule my household, and Amy rules my husband. He thinks of nothing else. I am only the old, grey-haired housekeeper.'

'Do you want her to come back?' said the secretary bluntly. 'Is that what you are driving at?'

'Yes, that is what I am driving at. I am sorry to say I have sunk so low, and I want you to help me. It is the only way. I want to abolish self. Besides, I was always fond of Amy. And I believe in her, in spite of appearances. It isn't as if I was trying to get back my husband's mistress into the house again. Amy was a good sort, only a little too autocratic. But except for her managing one rather too much, I have nothing against her. If *only* Jeremy hadn't talked so much and taken everyone in the place here and at Oldfort into our confidence no harm would have been done. . . . The doctor doesn't say so; I suppose he is too delicate to say such a thing to me, but I can see he thinks nothing else but Amy will cure Jeremy. He knows all about it. How could he help? There's that photograph of the picture that's like Amy stuck out on the desk at Oldfort, for all the world and the office boy to see. And Amy in a group that Mr. Judd did—that Jeremy keeps under his pillow, I know. Amy would never be properly photographed—I suppose she had something in her life she was afraid or ashamed of—I don't know, but I do know that Jeremy does his best to be reminded of her every minute. Everybody within a radius of twenty miles of this place knows now that Mr. Dand of Swarland loves a woman who isn't his wife, and exults in it. It is a horrible snub and disgrace to me—but, as I said, it is a case of being bewitched.'

'Bewitched, besotted, maddened, as we all were!' Mr. Johnson burst out, gained by her melodramatic excitement. 'Do you know that even my wife and I are estranged on her account? Such an imbroglio! 'Pon my word, I don't see, even if we could communicate with her, that we could possibly have her back here.'

'Send your wife to me, Mr. Johnson. I'd talk to her. I would convince her—of what I have come to feel convinced of myself. I would tell her that I don't regard them as human at all—people like Amy and my husband. They are too morbid to be real. They confuse themselves with reading books and muddle their ideas of right and wrong. I have even a strong idea that those two never even cared to kiss each other, but lived on a vague sort of spiritual plane, somehow, where everything looked different and where they had made up their minds to do without commonplace things of that kind. Nice, silly, stupid things, that I can't imagine a man loving a woman without! But, then, I am human. I loved Jeremy as human women love. I can't understand these halfway houses. Mr. Johnson, I don't know why I am speaking to you so intimately——'

'Dear Mrs. Dand,' said the author, touched, 'I quite understand. You are explaining to me your belief in the absence of traffic of love between these two persons. You may be right—you probably are.' The sweat stood on his forehead as he thought of the guilty days of Blois, and of what he alone in the house knew. 'But, to be practical, I don't see what is to be done, since we have no means of finding her. I doubt if even Jeremy knows. She has left him quite in the dark, and that is what upset him so. There seems nothing to be done now except for you to modify your style as far as you can in the line that Jeremy prefers. Should you not contrive somehow to be less digni-

fied, more lively, to be a charming, all-around companion for him, meet him in his studies, as she did?'

'Read improper books, do you mean?'

'If Amy read them, she didn't understand them, I am sure,' hastily retorted the secretary, adding diplomatically: 'She was not really literary. But I see no need for you to alter your character to be attractive to your husband. Just be sweet, sprightly, capricious at times, as women know how. Graft your own charming personality on the idea he has preserved of hers, and edge it out. Live Amy down, in fact.'

'I'll try. You know, Mr. Johnson, I don't blame Amy quite. It's partly my own fault. I have been thinking. I neglected the wisdom of ages, which says plainly a woman who cares for her husband must never venture to have an attractive companion in the house. It never has answered yet. Not that Amy was much to look at!'

'She had—somehow—what Helen of Troy had,' said the secretary meditatively; 'or Cressida.'

'What was that? Not beauty? I was going to tell you of a curious case. There was a girl my mother was telling me about—I doubt if mamma ever saw her or heard her name—but still she knew the whole story. This girl was one of *that sort,* you know. I mean she was a very wicked girl, and what you call lived with Sir Mervyn Dymond, whom mamma knew so very well. She was caught red-handed, in the house with him when he died, and very cleverly contrived to disappear after the inquest. Then mamma heard of her again, with her name slightly altered—it was a common name, I never heard it. And she had had the face to take a situation with mamma's great friend, Mrs. Riven, at Swanbergh, as lady-housekeeper, and there she did her best to get hold of the young son of the house and lead him astray, only she was pulled off in time.

The boy's dead since, I hear, and the mother says that the adventuress ill-wished him at the time, out of revenge, and threatened her with his death, that did really happen a year after.'

'What a sad story!' murmured Mr. Johnson, whose brow was wet—but it was a hot day.

'Yes, wasn't it? No, what I say is, Amy hasn't behaved badly; not so badly as some of these creatures do. She did what I suppose a decent woman in her place would have done: she went away as soon as she saw the trouble she was causing in a respectable house—at least, that's the way I read it. She's gone, and feels very proud of her forbearance and moderation, I daresay. She got nothing out of Jeremy; but then he's not fond of giving presents. He never even gives *me* things for my very own. Hates parting. But what has she left *me?* The empty shell of my happiness—the husk of a husband who used to adore me! I have no doubt she considers herself a martyr to her sense of duty—perfectly blameless because she has run away from temptation—but I personally, don't thank her for refraining in the hour of her triumph, so to speak, and with the result that she has sent my poor husband melancholy mad!'

'But, Mrs. Dand——'

'I don't. I think she has behaved very badly to us both, saving her own character at his expense. She began it; why is he to suffer because she suddenly thinks better of it and turns good? A woman has no right to lead a man on so far and then run away; it is not fair to him.'

'Then you would have had her——'

'Oh, I know; it's exactly what women do, save themselves at the last moment and vote themselves honourable. But the man thinks very little of them. They should consider all these things in the beginning and realize

what it means when they start a flirtation. No, they lead him on, and then cut off supplies suddenly, and the man goes mad. Yes, Jeremy is mad because of her, and the disappointment she has given him. Well, let her come back and cure him!'

She looked round her wildly, and met Mr. Johnson's startled eyes. This was a new theory, even to him.

'You think me immoral; perhaps I am. But that's it—that's the only way. And never mind me—I'll go. I'm only the extra person in this house, not wanted, I, and yet I was considered a beauty! Jeremy——' she wept. 'That's all as it may be, but I won't stand in the way. I love my husband. I think only of him, of his happiness, not at all of mine; I am not a selfish woman. I am capable of sacrifice. I could do as Alcestes did, Mr. Johnson, Alcestes and the burning brand, who gave up her life for her dead husband, and I will divorce him. I'll do anything they like. I don't care. . . . Oh, Mr. Johnson, I'm past caring! Send my boy to me! He can't take that away. . . .'

He left her sobbing, pressing the flaps of the pink peignoir into her eyes.

CHAPTER XLVI

Jeremy Dand's room in the office of the works at Oldfort was furnished in his own rather severe taste, bearing no signature of any one of the decorating firms in vogue. His individuality was duly stamped on this, his abiding place for many hours out of the day; but it would have been impossible to reduce his theory of furnishing to a formula. He liked to see glass in a room and water in a landscape. Accordingly the pictures and engravings that decorated the walls were all views of the riven Duren as it flowed idly past the towers of Blois, or was usefully covered with shipping at Oldfort. Four exceedingly good Empire mirrors and a cabinet full of Venetian crystal and coloured glass goblets that occupied one whole side of the room suggested a conservatory rather than an interior.

Mrs. Dand, in happier days, was used to make faint jokes about glass houses in this connection. She came there very seldom now. She was annoyed by an enlarged photograph of one of the figures in a Piétà of Andrea del Sarto which stood on the vast writing table in front of her husband's blotting pad. She could never constrain herself to forego the first sour glance at it on entering the room, though she had schooled herself to make no verbal objection to its presence there. He would not have tolerated her criticism, but, indeed, Mrs. Dand, who had been in her youth a pupil at the South Kensington School of Art, did not think that the head of the angel in question was at all like Amy. No matter, her husband said it was; he fancied he saw a resemblance. Tom Judd and Mr. Johnson, in fact, everybody about the office was aware

that the master had set the photograph up in an inlaid frame as a reminder of her. He had another memento, a cast of Amy's ugly hand in silver, which took up a whole drawer of the desk.

Mr. Johnson was just sensitive enough to be able to realize how deeply his chief was changed by the domestic catastrophe—for he spoke of it as such—which had overtaken him. He permitted this public testimony to the vagrancy of his affections and he made a confidant of his secretary, who saw in the first instance serious signs of decadence in this once stern, self-contained man. Mr. Johnson, from the moment Amy left Swarland, found himself the only person privileged to speak with freedom to Mr. Dand, and having lovingly accepted the unenviable responsibility, spoke often and did not mince his words. His language was stronger, more forcible than it used to be; he was more of a man of the world. His marriage, which had not turned out well, had made a man of the deprecating, unworldly being who had once held converse, out of business hours, with his chief, only on the merits and demerits of books and rare editions. The contents of Case G had been sold. Mr. Johnson had advised it. Dand and he had changed places: it was Dand who listened, who maundered, who was humble, now.

Mr. Johnson spoke authoritatively, as he stood by the long, flat desk, watching Mr. Dand absently fingering a small, beautifully inlaid pocket pistol that lay constantly under the Andrea del Sarto photograph, and that the housekeeper was forbidden to touch during the morning's stage of dusting. She had been assured that it was loaded, but she openly declared that she believed nothing of the kind. Still, she did not care to handle it. It was no business of hers. She didn't know who the boy in the photograph was of—not she! She knew what they said.

. . . . The pistol had lain there for six months now, and custom had at last blunted the dread of its use in all of them, even in Mrs. Dand. Like the housekeeper, she had come to look upon the lethal weapon lying there as a silly bit of 'show-off,' intended to frighten them all into good behaviour and aid her husband's pose as a tragic figure. That pleased him just now; it was part of his illness. Loaded? No, of course it was not loaded—at least she thought not. All the same she hated the sight of it nearly as much as she hated the sight of Amy's portrait. They were both symptoms of the same disease.

Mr. Johnson knew better. The pistol certainly was loaded, yet his reasons for remonstrating with its owner were more or less those he gave.

'Jeremy, you can have no idea how it fidgets me to see you playing with that wretched thing! The very sight of it lying there worries your wife dreadfully.'

'She needn't come here.'

'One knows exactly how it is,' continued the secretary; 'just a habit with you, a morbid toy, like those arrangements one wears on a watch chain. A friend of mine used to sport an ivory skull with shifting jewels for eyes. Hideous bad form, I think, that sort of thing.'

'I can't help it, Johnson, if you do think me a bounder and as vulgar as Werther. I admit it is vulgar to take on so because a woman chooses to leave you. But this one's worth it. As for this thing'—he gave it a scornful push —'you can look on it as a safety valve. Give a man rope enough and he *won't* hang himself. I have thought of it, I confess. Let me see, seven months that I have dangled this charming *brêloque* on my chain, and not a sign! If this goes on, I shall be driven to use the pretty toy or bang my head against the wall till I smash my skull in. It comes on in fits. . . . Only to-day. . . . I say, John-

son, it is too bad! What can she be thinking of? Seven months and not a line!'

'She said she wouldn't write, and she hasn't,' said Johnson quite gruffly. 'Give her credit for as much obstinacy as yourself. By the way, your wife gave me to understand yesterday when I was up at Swarland—I gather you did not sleep at home—absurd!—that she intended to come here to-day and speak to you about Amy.'

'The deuce she did! Why?'

'She seems to think she can't stand it.'

'Stand what? No more can I!'

'Self, self, always self!' said the secretary. 'I must say, Jeremy, this is an uncommonly egotistic attitude of yours, sitting here, day by day, nursing your grief and letting everyone know the cause, regardless of your wife's claims on you. Of course, it all rebounds on her, and her position in her household and in the county. It's an odious position for a man to place his wife in. It's come to this: she's a woman of sense, and she'd rather have the girl back. She says, and she's right. that she couldn't be worse off if it was all on again!'

The drooping man in the swivel chair raised his head and looked at his mentor helplessly, disarmingly.

'My dear, I haven't her address, or I'd get her back like a shot—not that my wife would like it, whatever she may tell you, poor thing! I pity her. She's crushed under two millstones.'

'Neither would Amy like it. Amy has arranged differently. You don't seem to see, Jeremy, that Amy, fine creature and good girl, is grappling with the situation you muffed, and managing it admirably from everyone's point of view. I have told you all this a hundred times, but I will go over it again. What you, what we have all got to do, is to help her, and fall in with her plans. She

won't have it your way. She won't—God bless her!—come back to you and have an intrigue; she won't have you go where she is and have a scandal. I think, putting it as a man of the world, that you have got off uncommonly well. It isn't every man has an affair with a girl and finds her able and willing to take the business off his hands and manage the whole thing by herself. She's a brick, that's what she is, and you and all your house ought to be down on your knees in gratitude to her. Poor girl! She may be having a child? Melisande said she was well on the way; or, Melisande may have been mistaken, and she may be all right and at work again. She isn't penniless, at any rate, for I understand you were most generous. Mrs. Dand isn't aware you settled money on her, I suppose? I did not gather she knew, from her conversation to me. Just as well. But it was the right thing to do, old man. Cheer up! The chances are that instead of being upon your bones continually, as a weaker woman would have been, Amy is in the best of health and spirits somewhere. Why should you insist on supposing her ill and unhappy?'

'I don't know. *I* am.'

'That's the merely selfish point of view, I beg to submit.'

'I *am* selfish.'

This self-evident proposition was disregarded by the comforter. He approached and laid his hand on his friend's that lay on the weapon.

'Old man,' he said—Johnson had picked up a few male phrases since his marriage—'dear old man, don't take it so hardly! You have a handsome, devoted wife, a fine boy, a prosperous business, and splendid health, if only you wouldn't play such tricks with it. Why should you chuck it all because one little pale girl did not choose to stay here and be your mistress? And I—anyone could

tell you that would have ended badly for both of you, if you had had your way. You could not possibly have kept her at Swarland, and if you had set her up at Oldfort or elsewhere, it would have been sure to have leaked out somehow, and scandal would have ensued.'

'Damn you, scandal should have ensued! You completely misunderstand my aims. I didn't mean to hide Amy away, or anything of that kind. No, no! Edith would have divorced me, and Amy and I would have married and gone off somewhere together.'

'You were reckoning without your host. Amy would never have seen it that way. She was fond of you, but she had too much sense to ruin you. She did what she could; she showed no resentment, she took your money and made no vulgar ado about it, like the lady she is. Though I can see no ethical reason why she should have refused. You are so rich—fifteen thousand pounds is a mere pin-prick to you. She is doing something with it, I expect, turning it to profit somehow. I should not be surprised myself if she had gone on the stage. We might easily go to the play in London and see Amy looking at us gravely over the footlights any blessed evening!'

'I'll go up to town to-morrow and not leave a theatre unvisited!'

'Do so, but mind you, keep away from the stage door afterwards. Amy would not think it very gentlemanly of you to hunt her up. She even might call it caddish.'

'A man in despair doesn't stick at being called a cad. What's that? Who is that?'

Tom Judd had appeared at the door of the anteroom.

'A lady wants to know if she may see you, sir?'

'I see everybody. Show her in.' Mr. Dand turned to his secretary. 'Suppose, Johnson, that it were Amy? I never turn anyone away now.'

'The long arm of coincidence, I fear, won't run to anything so dramatic as that,' answered Mr. Johnson, as he retired in favour of the personage that Tom Judd was even now introducing.

She was a plain, spare, not unmotherly looking woman, dressed in black. There was a suggestion of the nurse about her, not warranted though by her unprofessional attire.

'Mr. Jeremy Dand?' she asked.

'I am Mr. Dand. Is there anything I can do for you?'

'I bring a letter, sir, from Miss Stephens.'

His hand, which had been resting familiarly on the revolver, was stretched out. The nurse in the woman easily read the febrile eagerness in his gesture, and stepping quickly up to him, she delivered up a bulky envelope.

'Thank you,' he said quietly, mastering his voice. 'There seems a good deal of it. Would you mind returning a moment to the anteroom while I read it through. You'll find the illustrated papers there.'

She obeyed him, and he opened the packet. There was a minute curl of pale-coloured hair in it which he took out and placed on the desk in front of him, without pausing to consider it. He was in haste to get to Amy's letter.

CHAPTER XLVII

My dear Jeremy.

I hope you are well, and that you don't miss me as much as you said and thought you would. One never does, luckily. I told you you were not to worry about me last time I saw you. You promised, I think. But as I am not sure that you are obeying me, I am writing now to tell you that I am quite well and happy, and can bear all that I have to bear, knowing that it's all in the day's work of a woman. It is. I am convinced of that now. I always used to think it, even in my maiden days, and certainly now, that I have gone down into the arena and fought, instead of holding aloof as so many quite brave women do. Not that they can always help themselves! They may never meet anyone who will give them Marriage, which lets them into a much better thing and is the only door to it if they are quite nice women. But for those for whom the gates are so opened, who are admitted to the arena of combat, I do think it's mean of them. Do you remember how cross I used to get with Edith complaining? That was my instinct, I suppose. I felt that somehow she was being a traitress to the cause. And she was married, too! Everything made easy to her!

The doctor here says I am a good case, not because I am a splendid healthy woman like her, but just because I keep up my spirits so well and take an interest in what is going to happen to me. Indeed, that is why, having been so calm and peaceful lately, it has occurred to me that perhaps you have not got the immense bless-

ing that I have, of a mind at peace? If a letter from me would make you easier, it seems selfish of me not to write it. You *may* be anxious about me? There's no reason now against my writing to you, since you have been so good in not following me, or having me watched. At least, I conclude you have not, for I have seen no flat-footed detective gentleman idling about the house. So it is only fair you should have any little bit of comfort that I can give you.

You must know, Jeremy, that though I talked of a brother home from sea to put them all off at Swarland, that I have no such thing. Since my poor mother died, I have not a single relation in the world. I had not even a friend in London, unless you consider Dr. Pottinger, the head of the asylum where I had had to put mother for eight years, as a friend. She died there, and he wrote rather nicely to tell me of it and condole. Perhaps he was well disposed to me because I always paid her fees regularly, and gave him no trouble. Anyway, I made up my mind to confide in him. I wrote to him, and told him the exact state of the case, without making any mysteries, and so on.

He played up beautifully, and found me a nice sort of half-lodgings, half-nursing home, kept by an old nurse of his, Mrs. May, who now takes up maternity cases. The establishment is attended by a doctor he knows, and is run under his own eye. It's as clean as a yacht's deck. This is all you need know, dear, about me.

The lady who brings you this *is* Mrs. May. Be nice to her and offer her some lunch in the office, if you can, for she will have travelled all night to oblige me and bring you this. She is going to take the night train back again, for, of course, she isn't easily spared from here, and she is most kind to undertake it at all and indulge a fancy of mine,

for I could of course easily post this. N. B.—She is a dear.

So you see, Jeremy, I have fallen on my feet. Truly, I am not at all depressed, or sad, or even frightened, for I am delighted to have a baby. It is no good my pretending that I am sorry now it has come to the point. And I am not even young. If I had been quite young, it seems to me it would have been still more natural, less reprehensible still, and yet it is the very young, forlorn mothers —servant girls—who make all the tragedies, kill their babies, and so on, for shame, when they are just the very ones on whom the moral part of it ought not to press at all. They literally know not what they do. If I had a vote I'd alter some of those arrangements.

Of course, if it had been possible, I had so much rather have had a husband to pet me, and say, 'Poor thing!' and look after it when it comes; but that was not to be, apparently. Nobody serious, with income enough to keep me, ever did want to marry me, nicely and properly, as well brought-up girls are married, without worrying about it. That's the best way. I think myself that parents should have more say in it. My own little matrimonial agency didn't come to much. Sir Mervyn Dymond offered to, but it was only out of pity and show-off. A young Russian I knew meant business, but then he was an anarchist. I loved a boy once, and he loved me. It was a very pretty little affair as it stood, and the only one I look back on with pleasure. Then your Mr. Johnson actually went so far as to refuse me, with a fortune tacked on to me—did he ever tell you that? I have wondered. But all my little wonderings are submerged now. And although I suppose it was a sad affront to me, I always respected Mr. Johnson for backing his own opinion. You know what he thought of me, for you thought the same; you

saw me go off with the old man. Oh! why did you leave me like that in Paris? That was your crime, not the other. It brought me to this.

And I don't even know whether this was my own fault or no? I wonder what Mr. Judd would say, if you took him in a sensible unprejudiced mood—with his surplice off? For of course one knows well enough what he would say *officially*. But what would he, as a sane human man, think of me after he had heard the whole story—which of course no decent woman could or would stand up and tell him. That is why you have to be a law unto yourself in these matters. You *can't* talk it over with people, not before the event, anyway, and after, is only another form of self-indulgence and maundering.

But if you ask me, I put it all down to the railway accident which upset me so, and paralyzed my will and made me quite stupid and uncalculating for a time. That was just the time you chose. (I don't mean on purpose.) You were a good deal upset yourself. The shock to the system! Can't one's sense of decency and fitness get jarred, too, temporarily, along with one's spine? That's what I fancy happened to you, only you are so strong. Mr. Johnson wouldn't have had a sound vertebra left!

My spine wasn't jarred, for I wasn't on the train, but I *saw* things. To all intents and purposes I was a moral idiot after that night. I know that, but I also know that any man *not a doctor* would say that it was all nonsense, that I had as much free will as was necessary to protect myself at the time, just the same, even although I had constant headaches and so on, and that you can't paralyze the sense that knows the difference between right and wrong so easily as that comes to.

And then comes the question of right and wrong, assuming that I *was* able to distinguish. According to the

theories I had always said I held, it was right, perfectly right, the law of nature. And yet I know quite well that if I had been *quite* myself, my instinct would have said No. And I believe by that I mean merely the unnatural instinct of self-preservation which has grown up in civilized women and that warns them, apart from morality, not to let themselves be persuaded into doing anything which will bring down the rest of the herd of women on them, with horns and claws out, ready to rend and punish them for evading nice little rules made for the convenience of the greatest number—of plain ones. If you infringe the women's taboo you suffer for it. They simply won't have it. What women call a 'man's woman' is sure to have a bad time in the end. She is the unhappy, primitive sort of creature who when a man crooks his little finger persuasively at her and says, 'Come hither!' feels forced to leave her intrenchments, and follow him into the open, where the fighting is. Men always somehow lead to bother, if you let yourself take any interest in them at all.

Don't think that you alone taught me to try and find reasons for things in sociology. You know I had clubs and went to lectures and even gave them—the cheek of me! —in the old days before I went into housekeeping for you. I used to chatter about survivals of the fittest, and reversions to type and so on. That idea of evolution leads many a woman astray. She brings it in to justify her in certain emotional acts, that are as a rule quite against her own advantage. I have no doubt it affected me a little.

But anyhow, if I did do wrong, technically—and perhaps morally—we haven't settled that and never shall—I am being punished technically, by being planted out here, in the horrid half-country of the suburbs that I hate, to have my little child all alone, with no one to hold my hand, except professionals, and they are very kind, but not ex-

actly company. I miss you, your talk and even Mr. Johnson's. I am being left severely alone to work out my wicked theories in silence and tears. I have more time than I want to read and study, and bolster up my conscience with the books that expound my own peculiar doctrine, if I can find any comfort in that. I have as a matter of fact got them all here, the primers of unbelief, and Herbert Spencer, and Metchnikoff—not very comforting, somehow, but I go over and over them. They are the books I once mugged up my lectures out of, but they seem rather callous and inadequate and inartistic now.

You must not think that I am complaining, Jeremy, though perhaps it does sound a little like it. I am only showing you how I 'am hoist with my own petard,' as they say, and though I don't quite like it, recognize the justice of it. A husband would be a comfort, certainly, but it is surprising how soon one ceases to think of such a thing, and leaves off missing all the conventional accessories to the really important main issue, and that is having a child, just like other women all the world over, whether in the odour of sanctity or not. Of course sanctity would be better, but do you suppose the doctor thinks, as he goes about his work, with his mouth tight and his eyes attentive, whether you have got a wedding ring on your finger? Gracious! it makes no earthly difference to the will of the world, that he is there on purpose to further. The thing's too big for the people who are actually engaged in it to bother over trifles. And one comes one's self to think of husbands and the status they give, as mere conventional additions, like visiting cards and menus and armorial bearings on the panels of your carriage. You pay for them, and like other luxuries, they are not strictly necessary.

Here am I, looked after like a queen, and everybody knowing all about me and that I can but print *Miss* on my

visiting card. The reason is that they are, like me, only interested in the event, and they respect me because I am so in earnest and so wrapt up in my duties. Yes, I am being respected for the first time in my life! Of course one great point in my favour—I am too cynical to be blind to it—is that I have got money to pay my way and do the thing properly and give myself thoroughly up to my work. If it was not for your kindness I should probably have less kindness from these, and *after* I should have the spectre before me of having to support myself by work instead of looking after my child. And I could not get that, now, so easily. There's the rub for other women in my position, and why **they** get so bitter. Their men have not had any forethought for them. Naturally they get hopeless and wild and feel degraded and take up with anything. For instance, even if I could have managed to get through this time on my savings, I should still have had to look out for something to do when I get well again. And when I did get it, it would have meant putting the poor little unnecessary bit of life one had started, out to nurse or something, and ignoring it while one went out again into the market place to work for bread, and for money to pay a baby farmer for killing it! I daresay some of the accidental mothers, poor things, do actually get to pray it may die, when money won't come in. I don't believe that maternal affection they talk so much of, is implanted in us women as a matter of course, and if one has only all along, thought of the child as a nuisance, as an object that has no business to be there at all, and that one never meant to have—well, then I should imagine that proper maternal feelings never came any more than a proper supply of milk does, sometimes. It is frightened away. Perhaps doctors know that? Poor, unwilling, forced mothers—in for it before they know! Seducing servant girls is

rather like a dentist's pulling a child's tooth out without telling it first.

There's another thing that presses hard on women who have done what I have done, even if they are fairly well off. It sounds absurd, but they actually miss society—not friends, for they sometimes do have one or two—but acquaintances. Now I never did care for society and the gossip of women I hardly know, over servants and blouses at afternoon tea, so I shall not miss it. But for some of my sex that sort of thing sums up the whole of existence, and cruel respectable women know this well enough, and hasten to cut off supplies from the sinner. I say if they were to have the charity to leave her a few strictly feminine consolations, don't you know, she wouldn't be half so likely to take to a second man worse than the first, out of boredom.

Luckily, I don't care for women. The baby will amuse me, and I shall amuse the baby, I hope.

I may die—one must think of all contingencies—but I don't think I shall, because a good heart is everything and I am a fairly strong woman in spite of my tendency to anæmia, and that isn't nearly so bad as it used to be. But if I do die, Dr. Pottinger has promised me faithfully to look after it as his own, and he is one of those nice advanced doctors, nothing hide-bound about him, or else he wouldn't have countenanced me, or let his wife be about me so much. It will cost him nothing pecuniarily, for of course it will have its own dear little income.

If it dies, and some brutal people who mean well, would say that would be the very best thing that could happen, I should go abroad. Mark Pogogeff, a young fellow that I used to know out in Russia, tells me of a place I can get—English governess where he is tutor. But of course I hate writing or even speaking of its dying. Who knows, the

mother thinking over much of that possible danger might put it into its poor little unborn head to make it come to pass. And it would seem such a waste of all my energies, and such a falsification of the various fetiches that I have set up to console me and buoy me up.

For I will tell you, it is really a little doll's house that I live in now. I sit all day and play at bricks like a child. Sometimes would you believe it, I stop placing them and aligning them in my mind for a single moment, and then I see plainly that all my wretched cheap philosophy is only pumped up to help me to bear what I have to bear. For it isn't a perfect picnic, dear Jeremy. I ache in every limb. I am just a delicate woman having an illegitimate child, when all is said and done. And then, when I have borne it as well as I can, to the world's service, the Crowned Caprice who rules everything, and who settled that I was to come to this, may choose to clear us both out, root and branch, when the time comes? It may say: 'Look here, Miss Amy (laying special stress on the *Miss*), I can't help it. I have to put an end to your ill regulated activity, you have fussed about in my premises long enough, you shall *not* have a child of your own to manage. You didn't go about it the proper way—no husband! You are now discharged, like any dock labourer who would rather not. Just lie down, subside, be quiet!'

Death, that means! Death is there for me as well as for anyone else. It is a horrible antagonistic thought, not a sense. My mind conceives of death very well and clearly, my living flesh cannot. If every cell of one's body had, as they say, a separate flake of mind to itself, I suppose it could, so I think that is a sort of argument in favour of an over-soul. Even when you decree mentally that you will commit suicide, you terrorize your cells, you don't convince them.

Neither my mind nor my cells want to die. And yet I may have to. I have started what may lead to it. Think of carrying the means of death about with you perpetually, Jeremy! Under your heart, what may up and stop that heart!

It has made me feel quite sick, the sudden unreasoning terror of it. I have worked myself up, I suppose? I shall call nurse.

. . . . .

Better. I shall probably not send you this letter at all, only so much of it is written and it tires me to write. . . . Jeremy, where are you? Here am I, Amy, on this piece of planet, miles away from you! But you are on the same planet as me, right enough. Wouldn't you just come if I sent you this? And of course, once back in my sane mind, I shall not think of doing so.

But you ought, I suppose, to be with me at times when I forget myself so far as to positively shriek out for you on paper. It is dangerous. I believe, just then, I would have given the certainty of surviving this just to see you for a minute, and you know how I care to live. There's a privet bush outside my window and the white flowers spatter the ground like a dotted pattern on a carpet. It reminds me of you, for we both love the smell. How it comes out on summer evenings!

You. You. I write it with a sort of pleasure, you are the only person I have ever known really. That's something, and I am a woman. If I have a heart at all it puts feelers out after you. Is that love? I only know that it wasn't nearly so much of a fight to leave you, as it is to keep you away from me now. I seem to belong to you in my own mind in a way I never did when we were at Blois together.

Oh, why must we always insist on having love cut and

dried, made up in packets, weighed, and perhaps found wanting? Why must it always be All or Nothing? That would never suit me. I seem to have no use for such positive emotions. I just wish I could see you now, quietly; I yearn vaguely for one little solid moment in so much dreaming. Yes, I dream now. And that is what stands for My Love. That is all. Take it. It is the best I can do.

Let me think of Blois. It pleases me. A man loved me at Blois and was kind and coaxing and thoughtful for me, as men are to the woman they love. It was once, it need not be again. Do you see? Why should anything come of it—except perhaps the child. The child of a beautiful moment. Yes, at Blois you were charming, I see it all now. I don't wonder Edith is fond of you and puts out tentacles and claws you to her. The law lets her. You are her investment, she has put her savings—her emotions in you, you mustn't be risky or go bad as investments sometimes do. Well, I have not ruined anything, I am glad to say. I was awfully keen on not breaking up your home, wasn't I? And the rest doesn't matter.

I think on the whole Edith behaved very well, especially after the nurse, wretched interfering thing, had shown her your letter to me. Why did you write it? Now I should never have been as silly as that! You will say I was able to be prudent because I did not really care for you. I thought that myself. And honestly, you can hardly expect ordinary women to understand the very peculiar terms we two had agreed to be on in those days.

But, back to Blois—my little hour!

I can go over now, for I have time, all your queer sayings, all your little affecting twists and turns of tenderness, the way a strong man tries to recommend himself and please the silliness of a woman who has been

used to only small change of sentiment all her life. He hasn't troubled much, except about the big things, till he's in love and then he is suddenly plunged into a sea of detail that he would like to laugh at, only she wouldn't stand it. The way a busy man hates being idle too! Honeymooning—waste of time! But you did it—at Blois.

And I remember the silly tricks that used to come into *my* head through lightness of heart, and pleasure at being made so unusually much of. Do you remember once, when, being so thin, I laid down under the bed clothes, and flattened myself out in the form of a cross, a way I knew, so that anyone coming in—a burglar—couldn't have been sure that there was a person there or no? Do you remember Cat's Cradle in the Home, while my intellect was so enfeebled that I could play nothing else? And you played it with me by the hour—your beautiful hands, and my ugly ones! Oh, and do you remember the apricot?

You were my lover then, in my way. Don't be offended, but to me, it was just as nice, in the Home, before——. But of course a man would never understand that, and it doesn't matter.

Dear, I confess at this hour that I simply cannot imagine why I did not think myself in love with you enough to stay with you? I liked you so well, that it makes me fancy it was really and truly morals made me send you away. Something subconscious perhaps? You always said those three services at the cathedral. I seem to hear the best choir boy's screech even now and the way his voice seemed to pull the avenging sky down on me to punish me. And I, I was going to have your child all the time I sat there making up my mind to leave you. If I had known would it have made a difference? Oh, yes, it would. I couldn't have been so wicked as to feel virtuous, then.

I preached at you and sent you away. How cross you

were! I had no business with morals, had I? I with my theories! Well, with us Socialists, you never know when a sense of virtue will crop up. That was the way it came to me, and I took that way. The Crowned Caprice again! It baulked me.

But, Jeremy, if I had taken things then, as you wished me to do—do you recollect our long cross argument over the fire in the sitting room in the middle of the night?—if I had been persuaded to let you get Edith to divorce you, so that you could marry me, I wonder if it would have been successful? Should we have been happy ever after, putting aside the question whether or no we deserved to be?

Quiet, at ease, we might have been. There is a time for everything, and Love leaves us at peace at the last. I say Love, but you know what I mean. But perhaps we should have married, and I been content, satiate with emotion, while you loved again—another? There is more vitality in you. But I should have hated it, then, just as Edith did. I should have acquired property in your affections, or thought I had at any rate.

I think our peace of mind would have depended principally on how Edith took it? She loved you, you see? Perhaps by now you have come to realize that you are attractive to women—I don't call you conceited enough, except intellectually. If you had thrown Edith over, strictly according to law even, and you taking all the blame, she would still most probably have used it as an excuse to go all to pieces. She is very weak, of course it would have been her own fault, but all the same, it must have put us both tremendously in the wrong. We are not in the wrong now. I maintain it.

I shall not write any more to-day, I will put this that I have written, very untidily, I fear, on one side, and go over it later on, and see if it is fit for you and not too

disturbing. My message, Jeremy, is peace, not a sword. There is something I should have liked to say to you, but I begin to wonder now if you will ever get that thought at all? No matter, perhaps it was nothing. I wish I hadn't been so horrid to you at Blois. I wish I had loved you? Perhaps I did? I don't know. Darkness—faintness—the sword—I am bent double.

Nurse has come in and says I must not really write any more——

She says this is it. The usher of Fate standing at the door and beckoning and saying, 'Amy, come.'

If I ever see you again

CHAPTER XLVIII

Jeremy Dand lifted his head. The long letter he had just gone carefully through, written like a diary, though on many small sheets of notepaper and in many various shades of ink, was still extended in his hand. He did not crumple it up, for he was not displeased with it. It interested him in the various ethical points it raised, above all it reassured him, by means of the strong commonsense that informed it all through. His sad-visaged habit could not be abandoned all at once, yet the expression of his face was undeniably lighter, more open.

Mrs. May, who had not touched a newspaper, was sitting quietly, lost in her own thoughts, a few paces away in the little anteroom, but she was no longer alone. A lady had just come in, with the mien and freedom of a privileged person, sweeping past the seemingly humble client—Mr. Dand's lawful wife.

Edith advanced, rustling, fearful, nervous. . . .

'Jeremy, I'm afraid you are busy?'

His frown did not reassure her.

'I know you don't, as a general thing, like my coming to see you at your office, but——'

'Be quick. What it is?'

She made a helpless grimace. 'You are not very encouraging, dear! I only wanted to ask you——!'

Breaking off, she exclaimed. 'Jeremy, how grey you look! Who's that woman in the anteroom?'

'A woman who has come to tell me about Amy.'

'Oh, Jeremy, I guessed! And fancy, it was about Amy that I came to speak to you.'

'I am coming home to-night, if I can manage it. Won't your communication wait till then?'

'I had so much rather—Jeremy, it was something quite serious that I intended to say to you about her, and the spirit that brought me here may evaporate. Perhaps if you repelled me you would never hear it at all? I am shy of you, strange to say, after all these years of wedded life.'

'But, you see there's someone there?' he replied irritated by her unconscious pedantry.

'I must whisper, then.'

She came close to him and spoke in a low voice, so far as her excitement would allow.

'Jeremy, have her back! I give you permission. Now's your chance. For God's sake, get her to come back! We can't go on being like this—you and I. I am miserable. You must get her back. I'll be good. I'll be an angel. I'll be nice to her, I swear I will! If only Amy will put herself in the train and come back here and let it all be as it was before, I would consent to efface myself, absolutely——'

She strained against his arm as he sat. Her stiff figure, adequately boned and stayed, unyielding, refused to lend itself to the unusual attitude.

'Will you?' Dand looked at his wife, posing in this new capacity, with his sombre strained eyes, in which the suddenly exasperated, still unsatisfied longing for one absent woman held its own, under the merely superficial emotion that was excited in him by the other's act of renunciation. He doubted her. He was impatient to hear the nurse's story. 'And pray why will you be so good, so self-denying?'

'Why, for your sake, Jeremy,' she cried out, with strange sudden passion. 'Because I love you, and you love Amy.

You must have her. I have read of such things. I can't be to you what Amy is, I see it all now. I am nothing to you——'

She seemed to wait for contradiction, but he denied her that consolation. His clear, regular immutable features rebuffed her, as a god of the Greeks might estrange a Gothic worshipper, used to kneel before a romantic, less coldly pure type of image.

Bravely, however, she pursued, defying the mystery of the man she had never known, but whom she loved as Amy had never done. He realized it at last, but he was stiff necked still.

'And Jeremy. if after all, she won't come back like that—as we were—you two weren't lovers, really, were you? I staked everything on it—on your honour. . . . I always said——'

She irritated him by her pretentious appeal to a mutual standard. He opened his mouth to speak brutally, but she stopped him.

'No, no, don't answer. I had so much rather you didn't. I can see that you are dying to tell me horrid truths. You don't care how I feel, you never do, you would rather hurt me than not. . . . Oh, and you don't even deny that! You are like a wall. . . . Let me finish what I came here to say and go. It is this. If that won't do—as I say—being as we were—Amy our housekeeper, your friend and mine—I loved her—if you are going to tell me that that can't be, then I promise to divorce you, so that you can go straight and marry her.'

'Really?'

She was dull, not realizing that this fresh accession of brutality was with him the stiffening, the final assertion of will, the prelude to melting. She was tired out with the throes of her soul-birth and so much emotional exercise.

'Very well, I mean it,' she breathed faintly. 'Wire at once and tell her my decision. I permit you to marry her. . . . Jeremy, I believe I am going to faint!'

He put his arm out protectingly, as in duty bound, but his wife felt as if she was gaining some advantage.

'But promise, Jeremy, that you won't take the boy, or even Erinna. Amy was always absurdly fond of Erinna. But shouldn't I have the children in any case? What does the law say? Anyway, Amy wouldn't surely care for another woman's children?'

'There's no knowing?' said her husband cruelly.

'Well, I have told you I should oppose nothing except that. I have given in on every point. A woman can't do more!'

'No, dear, and not many women would have done as much. I do wish you'd sit down? No? Well listen to me, you are a good true woman, and you are behaving very nicely. Let us all behave nicely. I am only a brute, and I have no right to patronize you, only one always does, somehow? . . . You may, however, be quite easy, Amy isn't coming back. She will not come to me nor shall I go to her. I shall not do you that wrong. Even if I wished to she would not allow me. She refuses to come back here, or anywhere that I am, on any terms whatever. Nothing we could offer would tempt her, for she doesn't love me as you do. She has made her plans without me, will have nothing whatever to do with me. It's best, no doubt but it takes a brave woman to do it. She is brave—so are you, Edith. Don't think I don't appreciate the effort you have made in coming to me like this. Good women, both! It is enough to make a man ashamed!'

He laid his head on his hands. Edith had never seen him do that before. She stood by his side, awkwardly, not knowing what to do next, her flounces pressed against

his knee, her fluffy tulle boa spread all over the desk. Mrs. May's shadowy figure, waiting discreetly for these two persons to play the play out, was visible through the open glass door of the anteroom. From a more distant part of the building, the business-like click of Tom Judd's typewriter punctuated the anguished moments. . . .

Mrs. Dand's hands in their pale fawn-coloured casing, lighted on her husband's, and she essayed to uncover his face. Her tiresome, uneffectual voice, but recently flushed like a city conduit pipe with unusual floods of emotion, had relapsed into its usual grating insufficiency.

'Do you mean that you don't *want* to go to her?'

'No. I can content myself with writing to her now and then.'

'Ah, but will you get well with only that? Your health was all I did it for.'

'Yes, I mean to get well now. It was the killing anxiety, the uncertainty, that did it—made me ill and irritable, and a burden to myself and everybody else. I must make Johnson a handsome present.'

'What were you so anxious about, Jeremy? May I not know?'

'But since it is over?'

'Were they business anxieties or anxieties about Amy? If you tell me it was business, which of course I never interfere with, I'll not say another word. But I do think I have a right to know about Amy. Lots of things about her are very puzzling, and have worried us all for ages. Besides, I think her character ought to be cleared. You see that yourself. You know what Melisande Johnson used to hint at, and how I had to defend Amy through thick and thin——?'

'Not a word of truth in it!'

'Why, dear, you don't know what she did say?'

'Sure to be a lie if she said it.'

'Jeremy, I am sorry to say I nearly believed her at one time. I was not myself. My head—that illness . . .'

'Yes, poor child, I know.' He caressed her hand as it lay on the table beside him.

'It was during Christmas time, that party we had for the children, and I had only just been permitted to come down for a short while. Mrs. Johnson was there, and frightfully upset about Amy and her husband. He was really quite smitten at that time. Funny, how Amy raked in everyone, sooner or later! Mr. Johnson hated her at first. I couldn't get him to look at her. Well, that wretched Melisande got a perfectly disgusting notion into her head about Amy, and she actually persuaded me to let us test the poor child. It was her fainting away such a lot about that time gave Melisande the idea. I felt sure it was only indigestion, and I said so, but Melisande said her mother had told her it was a symptom of——'

He made an impatient noise.

'I think Melisande herself is older than she admits to, she knows such a lot that she has no business to know. Jeremy, I have been on the point of confiding this to you a hundred times, but it is a rather difficult thing to talk about with a man, even though he is one's husband. I have some natural delicacy. Do you guess? Anyway, even though it was only for fun, I have always been a little ashamed of lending myself to it.'

'And well you might be. Now, dear, you really must go. I am going to try and get back to dinner and sleep to-night, and I have a hundred and one things to attend to first. I must settle up with Mrs. May——'

'Is that the woman waiting in there? Good heavens, I quite forgot her! I let her see me cry. How dreadful!'

'She's used to that sort of thing, I expect. These

women know the secrets of the heart, as no other class does, and can size you up at once.'

'What is she to Amy, Jeremy?'

'Maid.'

'Maid! Has Amy got a maid? Is Amy married? To someone else? That would explain——'

'Dear, would you mind ringing the bell?'

Edith understood that she was dismissed. She leaned over the desk and pleaded.

'I'll go. I'll go. I'm lunching with Lady Gould, and driving with her afterwards. That's good business, isn't it? But you might do one thing to please me.'

'For God's sake, what is it you want?'

She pointed to the pistol. 'Put that wretched thing away. I don't believe it's loaded, but one never knows! If you would throw it in the river I could really believe that you intend to keep your promise to me and get better at once. You look happier already.'

'Anything you like, only go!'

He flung the revolver into an open drawer with an impatient gesture.

'It can't be loaded or he would never dare to throw it about like that!' thought Edith Dand, as Tom Judd appeared in answer to the summons. With a flutter of odorant laces the haughty wife of his employer suffered the obsequious little clerk to lead her out and close the door upon her. Jeremy Dand drew a long breath, and mechanically replaced the revolver in its place by the photograph. Then he went to the door of the anteroom.

'Now, Mrs. May—come. What the devil do *you* want?'

For Tom Judd had come back again. He had only shown Mrs. Dand into Mr. Johnson's room on the opposite side of the passage.

'Another lady to see you, sir.'

'God, it rains women!'

'You said you'd see everyone, sir.'

'Damn you, I'll see no more! Never another one.' His hand beat the air, nervously. The clerk disappeared hastily, with his rebuff to deal. Mr. Dand had rescinded the order of the day for the last six months. Judd cast a suspicious glance at the figure of the quiet woman in the anteroom, whom his master was even now ushering back into his study with every mark of respect.

'Now, Mrs. May, I am at your service. These people trouble me. But now we are free from interruption. Tell me all about your patient.'

Mrs. May gulped down something in her throat and was beginning to speak, when he interrupted her, saying eagerly: 'First of all, the event! When is it to be?'

'It's over, sir.'

'And the child?'

'A girl, sir. Well as possible. But the mother, sir—she died.'

CHAPTER XLIX

His hand fell, and closed upon the weapon. His long fingers seemed to clasp its shiny surface with a sense of relief, as though it were the touch of the skin of an old friend.

'Dead!' he said. 'Dead! Amy!'

'Shall I retire for a moment, sir?'

'No.' He struggled to master the muscles of his face, with a horrible, helpless grimace. The effort was not quite successful, Mrs. May observed. 'No. Stay where you are, please, and tell me about it. Just a moment! . . . I have been ill, recently. What was it, with her?'

'Hemorrhage, sir, the doctor said, among other causes. She just slipped away about thirty-six hours after the child was born. That letter I brought you, she began it quite a fortnight before, scribbling it off and on, and only ended it about a minute before the pains came on. Did you gather that, sir, from the look of the letter? There's a smear of ink—I only got it from her in time, for she was doing herself harm, writing it. And after that she was never well enough to take it up again. I put it away, for I had my orders to bring it to you, sir, only if the result was fatal. That hair, sir, is Baby's hair. I cut it off. She can spare it. She has got quite a lot.'

'Then if Amy had recovered I was to hear nothing more of her. I see. She was always sly. Too clever. Go on, Mrs. May. Oh, yes—take a seat. I am in no hurry now.'

'She was quite easy, sir, and calm—only a very little bit nervous at times for fear her constitution should not stand the strain at her age. She was gone thirty. She knew she was anæmic, and that that sometimes stands in the way of ladies making a good recovery. She used to say that was the only thing she had against her and that she was anyhow much better in that way than she had been. I was a bit uneasy myself, not on her grounds. She seemed to get so languid as time went on and it wasn't in her character, I could see. She was naturally a quick mover, and so very bright. We all adored her, sir. There was no other word for it. Days when she felt worst she laughed most. But for all she was nearly always so cheerful, she had a good deal to worry her mentally, one saw that. Any other woman would have given way more and used her excuse of not feeling up to the mark. The first three days she came to us, I must tell you, she *did* cry, she seemed to have caught a chill on the journey down or been a good deal put out or something. Of course we didn't know if she had travelled alone or not? She was hardly fit to, I should have said, and them that was with her didn't seem to have taken much care of her. Nor she hadn't eaten anything. Thoroughly chilled and fagged out she was, and her face bleached with crying. But in a very short time she seemed to make up her mind and settle down to what was before her. I never yet saw anyone so reasonable and gentle over it all. It's then people show their character, sir, to us nurses. You wouldn't believe how ladies alter, when they're lying there giving their orders, and haven't the strength to be anything but natural. Some of the seeming soft ones do turn out so vulgar and get to speak so course. Her never. A real lady if ever there was one.'

'Had she any plans? Did she speak of them to you?'

'She had all sorts of plans, sir, but they all depended on that infant when it came. It was to be such an infant as never was! She wanted it to be a girl. She said she would so enjoy dressing a girl, and making it frocks. I forgot to tell you, sir, she made all the baby's things and beautifully. Wherever did she learn to sew like that? No ladies can sew, nowadays. As for a boy, a boy was ever so much harder to clothe and took such a lot of starting in the world—not exactly a woman's business, so she said, and as he would only have his mother to look to. . . . ! "But a girl," she said, "if only she's pretty——" Excuse me, sir, she used to go on—"and it *will* be pretty, my child and his!—a girl if only she's pretty and well brought up, and that I'll see to, is sure to marry young and well, and get herself a place in the world. People don't take any more notice of her birth when once she's changed her name!" You must excuse me, sir, but we all knew how it was. Let alone her not wearing a wedding ring she didn't stoop to gas about being a widow and so on, like most women in her place would do. She was too proud to make a secret of how she came to be there, and for the matter of that, she knew that professional people don't talk. They haven't time or inclination.'

He took up the little lock of hair, like spun glass, lying on the desk beside him. It consisted merely of two or three yellow curving films. He put it to his lips. The action delighted Mrs. May.

'Where's the child?'

'With me, sir, for the present. It is only a week old. I have got an excellent nurse for it. Everything's done right. She saw to most things before she went off. It

wasn't so sudden as that. She even made her will all fair and square, with a lawyer, and left me a trustee. The other's a gentleman, Dr. Pottinger, of the asylum. He is going to take the little girl into his house along with his own children when she's a little older. Mrs. Pottinger is quite agreeable. Such a nice lady and so fond of Miss Amy! She was with her, sir, nearly always, she was next best to a husband, though nothing's better than that when you're ill. She cried when Miss Amy died. She said: "Oh, nurse, such a splendid woman! Why couldn't we have saved her! There was nobody more fit to live and bring up a child than her." Mrs. Pottinger and the doctor always told me that she was their idea of the Best Woman—the really newest woman, and that instead of dying of this baby, she should have lived to have more! She'd got hold of the right principle. Mrs. Pottinger brought white roses that she been and bought and covered her with them, because she was like a white rose herself——'

'What's the child's name?'

'Esmé Misericordia, sir. Misericordia was Miss Stephens' mother's name. Esmé was just fancy. We had her christened in the mother's room, at once, for her to be able to be present. She loved all the church ceremonies, she said, though she wasn't exactly a regular church woman, and a christening she liked next best to a wedding. She often read over the words to herself. After it was over, she kept repeating a particular bit that had caught her fancy. *"Let him pass . . . through the waves . . . of this troublesome world."*'

'That phrase doesn't happen to be included in the formula for the Private Baptism of Infants.'

'No, sir, but she knew it by heart. So might we all, if we thought about it. A troublesome world, indeed and

she had to leave it against her own will. She had lots of work in her yet. Oh, and to see her poor, white, vexed face, lying there, quite still, and forced to be quiet, as if God had said, "Don't move!"'

The woman wept. Dand rose trembling. The nurse was not surprised. She considered that on the whole he had borne the news well. A bit upset of course, but what man, that had known Amy, would not have been? And he was no godless person; that correction of his showed that he was conversant with the ceremonial of the church.

She had only been in his company a minute or two, yet he struck her as a very odd man, this betrayer of Miss Amy's! Her eyes followed him as he ranged aimlessly about the room, working it off a little, so she supposed. His hand shook as he took a photograph up from the table and showed it to her.

'Is this like her?'

'Miss Amy? In a way it is. Oh, very. Was it done from her, sir?'

'Yes. My Amy. No, it's an angel. Were you kind to her, Mrs. May, tell me? I know you were. Besides her letter says so. She says you are a dear. But whether you were kind or not, the Lord alone knows. I don't. I shall never know anything. . . .'

Mrs. May watched him, full of pity, as he walked hesitatingly to a little cabinet in a corner of the room and fumbled in one of the drawers. He was a fine fellow and he evidently felt Amy's death keenly and perhaps some remorse at the manner of it? Nay, it was pure sorrow, she thought, for as a result of her observations and knowledge of character, and judging from what Amy had implied over and over again, the thread that had run through all the disjointed talk of her delirium, he had behaved on the whole, well and as a gentleman. He had

a wife, she knew, the stiff handsome creature who had passed her in the office a while ago, with the perfunctory smile. Poor Miss Stephens, one realized that she had had something to bear! Her own fault? Nurse May knew nothing about that. That was between themselves. Mrs. Dand, though she had not Amy's charm, was a nice lady. Gentlemen will engage in these complications. . . . The weakest went to the wall, as a rule. . . .'

Mr. Dand came back to her, with a roll of banknotes in his hands, which he ran through professionally, flirting them one by one with his fingers. They crackled and rustled agreeably but the woman's eyes did not light up with any gleam of cupidity. She was crying. Dand noted that fact with some satisfaction, as he handed her the roll across the desk.

'There's a hundred odd in ten pound notes. It's all the loose cash I have about me. Accept it from the grateful father of Esmé Misericordia—is that her wretched name?'

'It is her name.' Mrs May was puzzled, for she had seen him kiss the foolish lock of hair. 'Don't you want to see her, sir?'

'I see her! Why should I?'

'She is your own little child, sir.'

'Own little devil! I hate it, I tell you.'

'Because it was Miss Amy's death, sir?' Mrs. May suggested, humbly.

'Exactly. I would not look at it for the world. The missile of the Crowned Caprice, the cruel elfish bolt that was sent out to destroy her!'

'It is very like you, sir.'

'Then it is like a man who has a good deal to be ashamed of! And who doesn't know what he is saying

at this minute. Now, to business. Will you do something for me?'

'Certainly, Mr. Dand, and welcome. And thank you, sir, indeed for the money, which there's no need for you to give—but it will come in very handy. I should like you to understand, sir, that I worked for her over and above what she paid. I did it for love—for love of her——'

'All right. All right! You are perfectly justified in accepting a bonus, since the affair is wound up. . . . Wound up. . . . I want you, then, to kindly remain a moment and witness a document for me. I mean wait while I prepare it.'

He sat down and wrote busily for ten minutes. Distant hootings broke the summer air. All over town, and in this office busy men were moving about and stretching themselves, preparing gleefully to knock off for luncheon. A fat city wasp that crawled on the window pane, began to buzz about, surprised that no one seemed to allow themselves to be disturbed by it. Neither the busy scribe at the desk, or the quiet woman in black who was watching him, averted a shoulder in its direction.

Mrs. May had dried her eyes, and was taking stock of the room—too queer for her taste. She decided that there were too many mirrors in it for comfort. . . . She thought she saw in one of them Amy's face, as she remembered it before the lid was screwed down. She could visualize it clearly now, the thing was so recent, but she had a strong desire to ask Mr. Dand if she might have a photograph of her darling to carry away as a remembrance. He would be sure to have a better likeness somewhere than the one he had shown her, and which she had lied about to please him? . . . She sat still, summoning up her

courage to ask him this slight favour. . . . She fancied tears in his eyes, dimming the spectacles, but she could not be sure? . . . She noticed a mark on his left temple, a wound, a sting? It was red and angry. . . .

He looked kind. He looked good. Again she began to wonder why he had seduced Amy? If he had had the luck to meet Amy first while he was still a bachelor, he must certainly have married her, he could not have resisted her—no man could, with the great gift of marriage in his hand free to give her, and yet refuse it. . . . Amy had come on the scene too late, that was all! Amy loved him, Mrs. May was convinced, although she never talked about that part of it. She never did talk about personal things. Mrs. May respected her for that, though, like other nurses, she was curious, and despised confidential ladies, while she listened with zest.

Mr. Dand looked up and asked her to ring the bell at her elbow.

'Call Mr. Johnson,' he said curtly to the clerk who answered the summons.

Mr. Johnson duly appeared. Mrs. Dand, who had only just left the office to lunch in the High Town with a great lady, the wife of the chief, had been confiding to him at some length the result of her recent interview with her husband. He thought she had done well and diplomatically. His eyes were full of sympathetic intelligence. He gazed eagerly on Mrs. May, according to Mrs. Dand, the accredited messenger of the woman for whose sake he could not bear to live with Melisande who had traduced her.

'News of Amy, Johnson,' Dand said. 'She's dead. Sign this document for me, please. Read it first.'

Mr. Johnson, horribly flustered, for Mrs. Dand's in-

telligence had in no wise prepared him for this, gave a quick strained glance at Jeremy Dand. He did not like the colour of his skin, the dull ferocity of his eyes, their reddened orbits——

'What's this?' he asked, roughly, in his perturbation. Curse it all! He had cared for Amy too! Dand might have spared him the shock somewhat! But he thought only of himself—always had.

'A codicil to my will. It's correct. But read it.'

'It seems to me that it's hardly the time to settle important things. You are tired—it's the luncheon hour.'

'Mind your own business. Read it, man.'

'I give and bequeath'—the secretary unwillingly spelled out—'You have written it vilely, I must say. "To Esmé Misericordia Stephens!"—Who may she be?'

'Mine. I am leaving her, as you see, a fortune of fifty thousand pounds. It is well that I am rich, with all these children to dower. Hugh and Erinna, nor Dulce either, won't suffer. Edith will not be prejudiced in any way—neither in position or in money, and that's all she cares about, luckily. There's not the slightest need for you to hesitate, in their interests, do you hear? Well, go on!——'

Mr. Johnson still hesitated. His employer's eyes flashed.

'Don't dare to have conscientious objections, you damned fool! Excuse me, nurse, we have known each other a long time.'

'No, I suppose I can have no valid objections, but I must say I *do* object to be hustled,' expostulated Mr. Johnson, wiping his forehead and looking wildly round the room. He felt that he ought to interfere, to manage to slow things down a bit. Dand seemed so queer to-day—hardly fit to dispose of thousands. . . .

'Sign, man!' his pitiless friend goaded him. 'Don't stare about. There's no Sister Anne to come to you.

There, that's done. Now, Mrs. May, your signature, please! You quite understand what it means, do you not? The will won't be contested, you won't be dragged into a suit, I do assure you. 'My wife is a lady, and will be perfectly content with any arrangement I may make—she was in here just now, to signify her willingness—and I am of sound mind, in spite of your critical remarks on my handwriting, Johnson. There now, that's done, and well done. Everybody will be pleased. Money goes a long way towards a solution, so I have always thought. Good thing I am a miser—she always said so. . . .'

He put his hand to his forehead.

'I am sane, but not well. It is hot. A wasp has stung me, or did I bang my head against the wall?' he asked them innocently. 'No matter. Thank you both—and good-bye. . . . Stay, there was something? . . . Oh, yes, yes. Johnson, of your love for me, do you mind taking Mrs. May across to the Continental, and seeing that she has something to eat? Amy'—they both jumped! —'thought of that. Good-bye, Mrs. May, I only hope I shall not have spoilt your appetite, one way and another?'

He turned sharply to Mr. Johnson.

'Be off with you now, the set lunch is at one. Farewell. . . . Good-bye!'

He seemed languidly in a hurry. He shook hands with the quiet, waiting, woman, and with Mr. Johnson, who began to speak. But Dand appeared purposely to misunderstand him, as Mr. Johnson thought afterwards.

'No, I can't join you, I am afraid. You must excuse me—I have a few little things to attend to before I can meet—my wife.'

'Jeremy!' again faltered the secretary, seriously distressed.

Dand's tone changed from politeness to menace.

'Do as I ask you, Johnson, and don't interfere. I know what I am about.'

He bowed them both to the inner door, courteously, in his best client manner, and going slowly back to his desk, fixed his eyes on the photograph from the Piétà of Andrea del Sarto. Then he raised the pistol to his cheek, with a deep sigh of relief and life weariness,

'Now, Amy,' he said, 'you were so keen on not breaking up my home——?'

THE END

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